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CAPTAIN CUTLASS, THE OCEAN SPIDER; Or, THE BUCCANEER'S GIRL FOE.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,

AUTHOR OF "PLUCKY PHIL," "ARKANSAW," "BILL BRAVO," "CAPTAIN APOLLO," "CAPTAIN BULLET," "OLD FROSTY," ETC., ETC.



"I AM HERE NOW, MURDERER!" RUNG OUT A CLEAR VOICE AND THE BEAUTIFUL AMERICAN GIRL THREW HERSELF
BETWEEN CAPTAIN CUTLASS AND THE TRAITOR PASSENGER.

Captain Cutlass, THE OCEAN SPIDER;

OR,

The Buccaneer's Girl Foe.

A Tale of Tropic Seas and Shores.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,

AUTHOR OF "BILL BRAVO," "OLD ECLIPSE,"
"CAPTAIN BULLET," "THE TEN PARDS,"
"PLUCKY PHIL," "COOL SAM AND
PARD," "VELVET FOOT,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE GHASTLY CRAFT.

ONE almost starless night, near the close of the last century, a trim vessel bearing Spanish colors, was making her way in a northeasterly direction across the Gulf of Darien.

She seemed uninhabited, for not a sound indicative of human life arose above her decks, and the dark figures of the watch were not distinguishable.

Those were dangerous waters and perilous times for certain ships, and especially for those foolhardy enough to fly the Spanish flag or the emblem of the Colombian confederation, toward whose shores, though far—far away, the solitary barque was headed.

She cut the waters of the Gulf like a thing endowed with life, and scudded on as if propelled by supernatural powers.

All at once there rung out the piping voice of the starboard watch in the accustomed cry of "Ship ahoy!" and a minute later a man, who seemed to have risen out of the floor, appeared at the watch's side.

"Her light's dead ahead, sir, Mr. Manton," replied the sailor, in response to a hasty inquiry. "I did not cry out until I had satisfied myself. I haven't forgotten the instructions. Yonder she is, sir, bobbing up an' down like a lantern on the waves."

Manton, who was a very young man and good looking, had already turned from the watch and was regarding the star-like object which, to quote the sailor, danced like a lantern or a lighted buoy on the darkened water.

For several minutes the scrutiny went on, and it was evident, from the workings of the young man's countenance, that he was troubled.

"That light is too low in the water to be attached to a ship's mast," he said at last, unconsciously speaking aloud.

"I don't know, sir," said the watch, quickly. "They're up to all kinds of tricks in these waters, you know."

"Do you call that a trick?"

Manton had whirled upon the sailor, and was looking him in the eye.

"I would not like to speak positive," was the answer. "Do you not think we are gittin' onto it? At this speed, unless one of us wears, we will run it down, an' then, sir, we will know what it means—mebbe to our cost!"

The last words were spoken in tones too low for Manton's ear.

He looked at the dancing light a few moments longer, and then spoke suddenly to the watch.

"I do not like to disturb Captain Fortuno for nothing, yet, yon light seems to possess some importance. What would you do, Tom?"

The sailor looked astonished.

"You're next to the captain on board the Red Mogul," was the reply. "I never give advice to officers, because—"

"Because they ought to possess judgment enough to advise themselves, eh?" smiled the young man.

"That's it, Mr. Manton."

"Then I'll waive my commission for the time, Tom. What would you do? Would you rouse the captain, when that light might prove of no moment whatever—"

"I wouldn't," was the interruption. "I'd wait an' see for myself first; we'll run afoul of it before long. As you have said, it hangs too low to be suspended to a mast, yet—"

"A buccaneer trick, perhaps?"

"They're cute fellows, lieutenant, an' they hate the flag we carry as Satan hates holy water."

Lieutenant Manton, who was not only an American, but second officer of the ship, turned from the watch with a smile for his observa-

tion, and again scanned the strange light with increased interest.

When seen by Fairweather Tom, the Yankee watch of the vessel, it was dead ahead, but within the last few minutes it had altered its position, as if the wind had driven it from its course, but there was still a fair chance of the Red Mogul running it down.

Lieutenant Manton had evidently taken the sailor's advice not to disturb the captain until he had inquired further into the true character of the light, for he had folded his arms and was watching it intently.

A few days before the Red Mogul had left Porto Bello bound for Cartagena, the most important maritime town of Colombia.

Her captain, Carlos Fortuno, a Spaniard, and a man who was noted for his fearlessness, had made the same voyage a number of times successfully, and that when a score of other vessels, less fortunate, had been caught and burned by the buccaneers who infested the Gulf, and whose hatred of everything Spanish was intense.

Nobody but this same Captain Fortuno possessed the courage to make such a voyage under the Spanish flag, and his success led many to believe that his ship bore a charmed existence, and that his bravery was respected even by Captain Cutlass, the most celebrated and merciless of all the buccaneers.

The state of the times of which we write was not propitious for water travel, but Captain Fortuno's success had disarmed fear to some extent, so, that of late, his state-rooms, of which he had but three in his little craft, were generally occupied.

Lieutenant Roland Manton had served awhile in the then youthful American navy, but love of adventure had carried him to distant parts of the world, so that when he fell in with the captain of the Red Mogul, he found a man after his own heart, brave, fearless and generous, and from the hour of their meeting almost he was Captain Fortuno's second officer.

Wherever he went, went also Fairweather Tom, the Yankee sailor who had united his fortunes to those of the young lieutenant as if some link of relationship bound them together.

Tom had served with credit on several American privateers during the war for independence, and on board the last one he first met the Red Mogul's young officer, then a cannon boy, whose life he afterward saved, to gain his everlasting friendship.

This was the link that united the weather-beaten tar to the handsome young man just in his twenties, and as fearless as a lion.

Let us go back to the pair watching the dancing light from the deck of the Spanish ship.

"Don't you see, sir, that we're bound to run afoul of the light?" suddenly said Tom, disturbing the lieutenant's close scrutiny.

"That we will. By Jove! it has suddenly become motionless on the water."

"What, sir! cast anchor?"

"It looks like it."

Fairweather Tom stepped to Manton's side, and looked at the light which did not seem more than a quarter of a mile from the ship.

"Stopped it has, by my tophights!" he ejaculated. "If we had a boat, Mr. Manton—"

"We'd board that craft, eh?"

"That's about it."

"Let us run her down."

There was a smile at the corners of Manton's mouth as he submitted the hazardous proposition to his companion.

"Without informin' the captain?" asked Tom.

"Why not? Am I not captain of the Red Mogul now?"

"Sartinly. It's no big vessel, anyhow, but may be a piratical trick. It'd do me no good to split her amidstships an' send the the sea vampires to the bottom. Run her down? The man at the wheel is Porto Bello Jack, an' he'd run the devil down!"

Manton laughed lightly as he left the side of the watch and stepped toward the man at the wheel whose eyes recognized him, and twinkled merrily as he came up.

"I've watched the light all along lieutenant," he said to Manton.

"Have you made it out?"

"Not exactly, Jack. Can you run it down?"

"Ay, ay, sir," was the instant response in tones that attested the sailor's eagerness. "But won't it waken the lady in the state-room?"

"Not if we merely graze the strange craft," said Manton. "I don't want a fair collision."

"I understand, lieutenant, an' if I don't perform my duty to your satisfaction, toss me into the first shark-bed we make."

Manton knew the man at the wheel and

hastily gave him a few instructions which he deemed necessary, then went back to Fairweather Tom.

"The thing still sits the water like a sleepin' gull," said the watch. "It hasn't moved a foot since you left. What will Porto Bello do?"

"He will touch her up as we go by."

"Good!"

A moment later the Red Mogul answered the wheel and veered slightly, then shot straight as an arrow at the light about ten feet above the water.

Manton and his companion rushed to the railing where they hastily took up positions and held their breath.

The lieutenant had taken the precaution to draw a pistol, for he did not know what kind of foe might be encountered, and he leaned over the railing with the cocked weapon in his right hand.

Managed by the sailor at the wheel, the vessel cut through the Gulf, rapidly lessening the distance between her and the stationary light.

"Now we hit him!" suddenly ejaculated Fairweather Tom. "By Jehosaphat! lieutenant, he's only a shell!"

A shell?

Lieutenant Manton of the Red Mogul made no reply.

They had reached the side of the singular craft, and the prow of the Spaniard had grazed it vengefully flinging it from under his keel, as if he spurred to run a helpless object down.

The next moment a wild cry rose from the old sailor's throat.

"My God! look at the fellow, lieutenant!" he cried. "It's only a raft with a mast and a lantern, an' a corpse for its captain!"

Lieutenant Manton stood speechless at the rail, his face devoid of color, and his eyes ready to start from his head.

In an instant, a flash of time, as it were, he had seen all.

A rough raft about twenty feet square, with a mast in the center; a light hanging from the mast about twelve feet above the planks, and above the light still the sorry remnant of what had once been a sail.

But this was not all.

A human being was lashed to the mast—a man, naked from his waist up, with his arms lashed above his head, and with the terrible stare of death and pain in his eyes.

The light showed this ghastly sight to the two men leaning over the Red Mogul's railing, but only for a moment, yet that was enough.

In another minute the ship had passed the spot.

Manton wheeled and started toward the helmsman.

"Put about, for God's sake!" he cried.

"Ay, ay, sir!"

In an incredibly short space of time the Red Mogul came dashing back to the scene of the terrible sea sight.

"It is gone, sir," said Fairweather Tom, looking into Manton's face, and speaking with feelings of relief.

The young lieutenant made no reply, but looked ahead.

The Red Mogul came back over the same ground, but the lantern, the man and the raft had disappeared!

"By heavens! I'll fathom the mystery," cried Manton, turning below. "I'll break the captain's slumbers if he shoots me for it."

CHAPTER II.

AN OCEAN MONSTER.

CAPTAIN FORTUNO was already awake, therefore the young American lieutenant did not incur any risks when he went below.

Porto Bello Jack had struck the raft hard enough to send a shiver throughout the Red Mogul, and sufficiently hard, also, to disturb sound sleepers.

Manton in a few words acquainted the Spanish captain with what had taken place.

"It's a pirate's vengeance," said Captain Fortuno between his teeth. "I do not know who the man is, neither do I care. By heaven! if this is Captain Cutlass's work, I'll go twenty miles out of my track to find him."

The two men went up together, and a minute after reaching the deck boats were lowered, and the men of the Red Mogul were clambering down over her sides.

"Captain, the lady of the state-room," said Lieutenant Manton, touching the Spaniard's arm.

"I can't go below now—"

"But she is here."

Captain Fortuno turned quickly, to find himself face to face with the most beautiful passenger he had ever carried.

Rather tall, elegantly formed, like one of gentle birth, with clear features, large black eyes and a wealth of black tresses, Lona Seward, as she called herself, stood before the Spanish captain.

She had taken passage at Porto Bello bound for Cartagena, where her father, an adventurous American, held an important command in the Colombian army.

Although but in her twentieth year, she had the stately dignity of one more advanced, and when she approached Captain Fortuno those who saw her stepped courteously back.

"I was suddenly awakened awhile ago," she said. "The vessel seemed to have struck."

"So it did—a piece of floating wood," smiled the captain. "I assure you it is nothing, lady."

The girl's eyes wandered to the men rapidly leaving the ship to fill the boats lowered to search the waters for the mystery which had just been run down.

"This is no place for passengers," said Captain Fortuno somewhat sternly as he avoided the girl's gaze.

"For me it is," was the quick answer. "Captain Fortuno, I ask permission to remain here awhile. I had a terrible dream just before we struck the floating wood. I dreamed that the best friend I have on earth had fallen into the hands of Captain Cutlass, the Vampire of the Seas, and that he had been treated with the greatest barbarity by that fiend, who has sworn to plunder Cartagena."

Captain Fortuno burst into a loud laugh.

"When he does that, lady, the stars will fall!" he cried. "Why, he couldn't plunder the Red Mogul. Don't let your dream disturb you. Lieutenant Manton, you will conduct the lady to her state-room."

The young American stepped forward, but the fair passenger gently waved him back.

"Pardon me, if I insist on remaining here till your search ends," she said, addressing the Spanish captain. "The winds will completely restore me, besides—"

She was interrupted by a shout that came up from the waters below, and, without replying, Captain Fortuno stepped to the ship's side.

"Fetch it to! By Jove! hyer's a man tied to the mast. Dead as a mack'el! Lay all hands on now, an' pull for your lives!"

Everybody on the ship's deck heard these words, and the heart of more than one must have stood still.

"Lady, the men have found something which you might not wish to see—a corpse lashed to a piece of timber," said the Red Mogul's captain rather brusquely as he wheeled upon the beautiful passenger. "My lieutenant will accompany you below. Here, Mr. Manton."

Captain Fortuno spoke English with only a slight accent, although his dark face and glittering black eyes betrayed his nationality.

"No! I remain here!" persisted Lona, firmly. "I have witnessed scenes of terror before. You may not know, Captain Fortuno, that I accompanied my father through two campaigns."

"Then you can look at what my men have found in the sea," and the Spaniard turned away to give orders for the corpse to be cut from the mast and lifted on deck.

Five minutes later amid profound silence, so far as human voices were concerned, the half-naked and stiffened body of a once handsome man of middle age was brought over the ship's side and laid on blankets on the deck.

Captain Fortuno took a lantern and held it over the face.

"*Madre Dios!*" he ejaculated with a quick glance toward the girl. "In the name of God! who did this?"

Then, before he could be restrained, he sprung erect and shouted in thunderous tones:

"Open the arms-chests and set the Red Mogul in fighting trim! Praise God that we may meet the Vampire of the Sea before we see our homes again!"

The men started back and stared at him as if they thought him suddenly bereft of reason.

Lona the beautiful passenger started toward the body.

"Don't look at it now, lady!" exclaimed the Spanish captain springing after her. "Holy Mother! it is no sight for her!"

But the the girl escaped his outstretched hand, being too agile for him, and the next moment she was looking down on the corpse.

All at once a piercing cry, a shriek, parted her lips, and instead of starting back she flung herself upon the body.

"Father! father! In the name of Heaven, what fiend's work is this?" she cried.

The men drew back and Captain Fortuno knit his dark brows and looked on without a word.

Lieutenant Manton stood spellbound.

He could not believe that Lona Seward had found dead on the Red Mogul's deck the father she expected to meet alive in Cartagena.

It was a strange tableau, that presented in the light of the ship's lantern on the deck, the breathless, speechless and sympathizing crowd, and the young girl clinging to the corpse of the parent so unexpectedly and terribly encountered.

For several minutes not a sound broke the weird stillness that had fallen over the scene.

The men looked at their captain and saw his eyes light up as with lightning flashes—that was all; he did not move.

All at once the girl stood erect and wheeled upon the Spanish captain.

"Do you recognize the fiend by his work?" she asked, pointing down at the dead.

"Ask me if I know a Toledo blade when I see it," was the reply. "We all know who ties his prisoners to a mast and sets them adrift on a raft."

"Name him."

"Captain Cutlass."

"Then, in the presence of high heaven and before my father, I swear to hunt this Ocean Vampire down. All my fortune shall be spent in the hunt if necessary. I will not enter home until I have settled with him. What is this vessel worth? I want a sea-hound of my own!"

Captain Fortuno was silent but only for a moment.

"The Red Mogul belongs to you from this hour, lady," he said. "Captain Fortuno you can command for any purpose. His men are your slaves. Santissima! you can make them your ocean bloodhounds if you want to. What say you, men?"

A cheer that shook the vessel's timbers was the instant response; it made the girl's eyes flash.

"The Red Mogul from this hour becomes the Ocean Huntress," she said. "There are trails on water as well as trails on land. Captain Cutlass has made a foe who will never leave him until he floats over the sea he has cursed, the prey of the vultures of the Caribbean! That man I hoped to greet in Cartagena, but he has met me—dead! My dream! my dream! Did I not say that I dreamt to-night my best friend had fallen into the clutches of Captain Cutlass? My father was my best friend."

The girl had scarcely ceased when a startling cry rung from several throats at once.

"Ship—ship ahoy!"

Captain Fortuno and his startled crew turned toward the starboard watch from whence the cries had come.

"Ship ahoy!" rung out again. "My God! the monster is upon us!"

At that instant there loomed up before the eyes of all in the weird lantern light and not five rods distant, the figure of a gigantic ship.

It came from the darkness that lay beyond the Ocean Huntress, and was rushing forward with the certainty of doom.

The collision could not be avoided, and the terrible situation held spellbound the Spanish captain and those about him.

The charging ship dashed into the light like a thunderbolt, and crashed against the sides of the Huntress with a force that seemed to crush her in!

Almost everything on deck was wrenched loose and every human being was lifted from the planks!

It was a terrible moment.

With hardly a moment's warning this water monster had risen from the waves, as it were, and thrown himself upon the unsuspecting Spaniard.

"Boarders to the front!" thundered the voice of a stalwart man who, standing on the prow of the water monster, looked down on the scene of confusion occasioned by the collision.

"Captain Cutlass!" cried the Spaniard. "Serpents of the Sea, remember the lady's oath!"

A wild cheer was the response as the crew of the newly christened Red Mogul rushed to the arm-chests.

Lieutenant Manton sprung to the young girl's side and before she could remonstrate lifted her from the deck and started below.

"The battle is no place for you now," he said to her. "The weapons of our men will avenge the Ocean Vampire's crimson deed."

He reached the door of one of the three state-

rooms and was about to enter when it flew open and a man came out.

"Heavens!" ejaculated Lona. "It is the other passenger, Colonel Cristo. He has been in my room, too!"

The following second fetched Manton and the second passenger face to face with scarcely five feet between them.

They had met before, during the voyage, but only casually, and now the eyes of both men flashed.

"What has happened?" growled the colonel.

"Enough," was the answer. "Captain Cutlass is boarding the vessel!"

Colonel Cristo seemed to recoil an inch.

"Then," he suddenly laughed, "then we will be his guests in a few minutes."

"Never!" cried Manton. "By the water gods! this ship shall never succumb to him. Here's your room, miss. I'll go back and lend my sword to your service."

He saw the young girl cross the threshold of her state-room and then turned away.

Colonel Cristo, tall, dark and flashing eyed, awaited him twenty feet from the spot.

Manton laid his hand on his sword-hilt as he went forward.

"That's right, boy," said the passenger, drawing his own blade. "She's a pearl of pearls. You've fought at your captain's side for the last time!"

CHAPTER III.

THE VAMPIRE'S VICTORY.

MEANWHILE the tumult of desperate battle between the crews of the two vessels, brought together as we have just described, was raging above Manton and his confederates.

Directed by the captain of the buccaneer who stood among the rigging above his prow, the ocean scourges had made the two ships fast, and had laid the boarding-planks safely, despite the furious resistance of the Spaniard's crew.

Then it was that Captain Cutlass descended from his position and threw himself in front of his men as he sent forth the signal to board.

Captain Fortuno and his men had already recovered, and the pests of the sea found themselves gallantly resisted by men as dauntless as themselves.

"Stand your ground! Down to the fishes with the water vampires!" shouted the Spaniard.

"Death to the Spanish spawn!" cried Captain Cutlass, and his followers as they endeavored to obtain a foothold on the Spaniard's decks.

Urged to desperation by the fate in store for them should they be overpowered, the crew of the Ocean Huntress fought as men never fought before.

Cutlass met cutlass in the terrible encounter, and pistol flash answered flash in the sickly glare of the ship lanterns that flickered here and there.

Never before had the pirate of the Gulf met with such resistance, but it only heightened his mad desire to conquer in the end.

His crew outnumbered the one that opposed him, and having fought often hand-to-hand on slippery decks, he possessed a great advantage over Captain Fortuno.

But for all this, the conflict remained for a long time undecided.

Back and forth swayed the two factions fighting like tigers of the jungle, and crimsoning the deck of the attacked ship with hot blood.

Captain Fortuno attempted to reach the chief buccaneer, Captain Cutlass, but each time strong arms and red cutlasses interposed, and he was frustrated.

At last the combat drew to a close, but not until both sides, worn out with it, panted for breath and rest.

Knocked senseless by a blow on the head, the Spanish captain lay against the mainmast, but not alone.

He was surrounded by men from both crews, some dead, others dying—all terrible evidences of one of the fiercest sea-fights that ever took place.

Captain Cutlass stood erect, the victorious lion in the contest.

He was a powerful man, physically, and strikingly handsome.

He wore no hat of any kind on this occasion, therefore, the long black locks that were known wherever his name was mentioned, fell unsecured around his ample shoulders.

He wore a close-fitting yellow jacket that glittered with a profusion of silver braid, and pantaloons of dark green which reached to the knees, where they were confined with silver buckles.

Silk stockings, which here and there showed

dark-red splotches, clothed his nether extremities, and his shoes, rich in buckles of gold, completed his attire.

The weapon which had given him the name he bore, was clutched in his right hand—a huge cutlass whose hilt glistened with gems, and in his belt were several pistols, completing the armament of the sea robbers of the last century.

There was an eagle eye in his head, dark, penetrating and deep-set, and his mouth was hidden under the long hairs of his mustache.

This was the most fearless pest the waters of the Gulf of Darien and the Caribbean had ever known, the man who had burned Spanish ships within sight of Porto Bello, and who had sworn to attack Cartagena some day.

The two vessels were still lashed together, and Captain Cutlass stood among the dead and dying, the victor of the fight.

"*Monsieur, mon ami, I am here,*" said a voice at the scourge's elbow, so unexpectedly that he turned as if a challenge to fight again had been hissed in his ear.

For a moment Captain Cutlass did not appear to notice who had addressed him, but all at once he started forward, and the hands of the two men met.

"What! you here, Colonel Cristo?" the buccaneer exclaimed. "I thought you were in Peru, or elsewhere."

"I am here," laughed Captain Fortuno's passenger. "I am on my way to Cartagena. You have gained a grand victory, I see. *Mon Dieu!* what a contest you had! The Spaniards must have fought like Catalonian panthers."

"It cost me some good men, but I am victor," replied Captain Cutlass, as his brows knit.

"I'm afraid you cannot continue your voyage to Cartagena in this vessel, my friend."

Colonel Cristo did not speak.

"You know my custom?" the buccaneer went on.

"Yes."

"Well, I shall not break it on this occasion. I will deliver you, baggage and all, safely in Cartagena in the Vampire."

The handsome Frenchman looked astonished.

"There! don't burst from astonishment—I mean what I say," laughed Captain Cutlass. "Transfer your baggage on board my vessel, colonel. I am going to deal with the Spanish spawn, spared by cutlass and pistol for a different doom."

"Thanks, captain. I had a fight myself below while you were having it out with the Spaniards here on deck."

"A fight below? With whom?"

"With the lieutenant of the Red Mogul. He was a young lion, I tell you, captain, but I dropped him at the lady's door."

"What lady?"

"The daughter of Major Seward of the Colombian service."

Captain Cutlass started.

"Is she now on board this ship?" he asked.

"She is, captain."

"And the young lieutenant—is he dead?"

"I think not."

"I will see them both, but the lady not now. Colonel, you will transport her with all her effects along with yourself, on board the Vampire. Is there any treasure on board?"

"Nothing but one valuable pearl, and to it I lay claim," laughed the Frenchman with a look which the buccaneer seemed to understand.

"Very well; it will not be molested," he said.

"I do not wish to encounter the lady on this ship."

"I am here now, murderer!" rung out a clear voice and the beautiful American girl threw herself between Captain Cutlass and the traitor passenger and faced the merciless pest of the Gulf. "I have met you sooner than I expected. Heaven has sent you across my path while the corpse of my father is yet unburied."

Captain Cutlass with a surprised look in his eyes recoiled a step and regarded the young girl strangely.

"I know whose hands did it," she went on.

"The dead man on the raft is somewhere on board this ship. Fate brought my father and I together before I expected to encounter him. It was your work, say men who know how you serve the innocent."

"It was by my orders," suddenly cried the pirate, and before Lona could retrace a single step, he was before her and his hand clutched her arm. "You may not know that Major Seward and I were bitter enemies years ago. By his vote I was outlawed when I had made proposals to abandon this free life I lead, and in re-

turn for that vote I swore to give him a sea-ride that should chill his blood."

There was triumph in the buccaneer's tones and not a particle of pity.

"You carried out your oath to the letter," she said, giving him look for look. "You sent him dead to his daughter coming home to him. Captain Cutlass, more vows than one have been registered in heaven."

He laughed.

"No doubt of that, my Colombian pearl," he said. "I suppose you have taken one to get even with Captain Cutlass."

"I have and I will fulfill it now!"

There flashed suddenly in the girl's hand as she spoke the blade of a knife, and the next instant it might have ended the career of the buccaneer if a hand had not suddenly encircled the uplifted arm.

"No thanks, Colonel Cristo!" cried Lona, wheeling upon the man who had interposed to prevent the success of her stroke. "No thanks to you, sir. You have already struck down a friend of mine, and now you vary your duties by saving the life of one of yours."

The Frenchman did not reply, but continued to keep the girl's hand imprisoned.

"You will continue your voyage in my vessel," said Captain Cutlass, addressing her.

"Under the flag that protects you?"

"Yes. I assure you that it will convey you safely to Cartagena."

"Dare you go thither?"

"Why not?"

Lona did not reply, but her hand dropped at her side, and her eyes suddenly lost their fierceness.

"All the prisoners will go on board the Vampire, will they not?" she asked.

"I am not fixed for carrying prisoners," said the buccaneer with a perceptible smile. "I carry passengers sometimes. Colonel Cristo and yourself will be given comfortable quarters on board my sea queen. The rest I shall dispose of as I see fit."

"Which means that Captain Cutlass is determined to keep up the name that has attached itself to him."

The eyes of the ocean outlaw glittered, but he made no reply to the girl.

"Colonel, you will see that this lady, with her baggage, is transferred to the Vampire," he said to the Frenchman. "I am desirous that the change take place as quickly as possible."

Lona gave the speaker a meanful look as he turned on his heel and left her with the man she despised.

Forced by circumstances to abandon the vessel which she had hoped to make a vengeance-hunter of the seas, the daughter of the soldier to resolved to face her fate with resignation and bide her time which she felt would surely come. Thirty minutes after her interview with Captain Cutlass, the fastenings that held the two vessels together were loosened and they drifted slowly apart.

Not one prisoner had been taken to the holds of the Vampire, and as the buccaneer left his prize with severed masts and almost sailless, a helpless hulk on the waters, there appeared a tigerish gleam in his eyes. He had achieved a great victory; another infamous triumph had been added to the long list already scored, but the light of brutality had not yet been reached.

He watched the dismantled Huntress from his accustomed place among the rigging of his own ship as the two vessels separated.

Suddenly a voice reached his ears, and he looked down into the upturned face of Colonel Cristo.

"She drifts slowly from us, captain," said the Frenchman, as he threw a look toward the Huntress. "At that rate, she will not sink before midnight."

"Sink?" almost laughed Captain Cutlass, as he lent a hand to assist the sinister colonel up to him. "Do you think I have depended on the auger to rid the seas of Captain Fortuno and his Spanish spawn?"

"Such, indeed, was my idea," was the answer.

"Then let me dissipate it, my dear friend. That vessel is drifting away with a slow-match burning toward her magazine! Captain Fortuno and his living crew are bound on their own decks. The young man you fought with is a prisoner in the cabin. This is a specimen of my vengeance!"

CHAPTER IV. UNTAMED.

"WHERE is she now? Here, sweep the sea with my glass and tell me if you see a sail?"

The man who spoke thus was Captain Cutlass, and he stood on an elevated part of the Vampire's deck beside Colonel Cristo, into whose hands he thrust an elegant sea-glass as he finished.

The Frenchman took the proffered instrument, and swept the sea in every quarter before he replied.

"I see nothing," he said at length. "But we heard no explosion last night."

"True; but the wind that struck us shortly after the separation, continued, as you know, until an hour ago. For awhile last night the keel of the Vampire scarcely seemed to touch the water. Do not think that my match failed to burn to the powder stored in the Spaniard's magazine. It has never failed me before; it did its duty last night. Have no fears, colonel."

"Fears?" echoed Colonel Cristo, with a laugh.

"Why should I have fears? Lieutenant Marton, the young American, was a half-unconscious prisoner in the cabin when we parted company with the Red Mogul."

"And he shared the fate of the rest."

"Certainly. Then why should I have fears?" Captain Cutlass did not speak for a moment.

"How did the lady pass the night?" he asked.

"Not very well, I think."

"She doesn't think very well of you, colonel?" he observed, with a smile.

Under his mustache the Frenchman bit his lip.

"And not very well of you!" he suddenly retorted, looking into the captain's face.

"Of course not," was the cool rejoinder. "She holds me responsible for the death of the man whose vote outlawed me."

"Her father?"

"Yes. Why doesn't she like you, colonel?"

"I'll be hanged if I know," growled the Frenchman. "I got acquainted with her during her stay in Porto Bello. Her black eyes infatuated me."

"And you were at her feet before you knew it?"

"*Mon Dieu!* how could I help it! It wasn't my fault."

Captain Cutlass smiled.

"I did not carry my infatuation to a proposal, but I suppose it would have come to that if she had not started for Cartagena rather suddenly. Of course I suddenly discovered that I had business there also, and Captain Fortuno sailed just at the right time to suit me."

"Did she meet the American lieutenant of the Red Mogul on board that vessel for the first time?" asked the buccaneer.

"I think so."

"And it was a case of love at first sight?"

Colonel Cristo seemed to recoil a pace.

"Love?" he echoed as his brows darkened.

"Who says she loves him?"

"It looks very much that way to me," was the answer. "At any rate, she takes a good deal of interest in him. They may not have met before, but they cannot have been entirely unconscious of each other's existence."

Back of his drooping lashes Colonel Cristo's eyes flashed madly as he looked seaward, cautiously watched unawares by the man at his side.

"Well," he growled under his breath. "If she loved him, the devilish vengeance of Captain Cutlass has stepped between."

"This reminds me that I have not seen this beautiful Colombian pantheress since she has cooled down," said the buccaneer suddenly. "I believe I will go down and look at her in daylight. She's calm now, isn't she, colonel?"

"Yes, as calm as you would expect a woman to be on the ship of a man whom she calls the slayer of her parent."

Captain Cutlass laughed in a manner calculated to cut his companion to the quick.

"Keep my glass and watch for a sail till I return," he said to Colonel Cristo. "I will not promise that you will catch sight of the Red Mogul; but you may make out a good chase."

Before the Frenchman could return the sea-glass or make a reply, Captain Cutlass was moving away.

"I am still near that beautiful girl if I am under your flag!" he sent in a hiss after the buccaneer. "Insult her or refuse to land us both in Cartagena, and you will find in me, Captain Cutlass, a foe worthy of your steel. Eighteen years' service in the French army have taught me to fear no man."

The captain of the Vampire disappeared while Colonel Cristo watched him, and the Frenchman turned uneasily toward the sea.

The vessel was bowling along through the waters of the Gulf under easy canvas, and making good headway.

Daylight had broken upon the waves once more, and a brilliant glow along the eastern horizon told that the sun would soon show himself above the burnished rim.

All around the sea was lovely in varied colors produced by the strengthening light, but not a sail was visible through the elegant glass used by the Vampire's ill-humored passenger.

The buccaneer brig was the only moving thing on the surface of the water, and it looked lonely amid the loneliness of the sea.

"I'd like to know what's going on below," said the Frenchman, as he abruptly closed the glass and threw a quick glance toward the ladder. "Fortunately for you, Captain Cutlass, the girl is unarmed and I am not near to perform the service I performed last night. Confound it! why didn't I let her get even with you?"

If Colonel Cristo had followed the buccaneer captain below he would have seen him advance straight toward the well, almost luxuriously-furnished room to which Lona Seward had been conducted on her arrival on board the Vampire.

There was a certain eagerness in the captain's eyes that seemed to quicken his steps, and when he reached the door of the room first mentioned he bestowed several light raps upon it.

The response was the immediate approach of some one on the inside and the next moment the door opened, and the buccaneer stood face to face with the Pearl of Cartagena.

Traces of a restless night just ended were clearly visible on the beautiful girl's pale features, and her eyes lit up suddenly as she recognized the man to whom she had just opened the door.

"Do you want to enter here?" she asked, as she held the door partly open, though her form stood between Captain Cutlass and the interior of the cosy little cabin. "You are master on this ship. This room even is not mine."

The buccaneer was taken aback by the apparent resignation in which the girl's words were spoken.

He had expected to have her fly at him like a tigress, but the torture and grief of a single night had subdued her.

"I came hither to see you, and I will enter," he said, and the next moment he had crossed the threshold of the cabin and the door was closed behind him.

Captain Cutlass, a tiger of blood whenever he led his sea scourges over an enemy's deck, appeared a different man in the presence of the American girl.

He looked into her dark eyes, and instinctively took a backward step.

"Stay, since you have come," she said with a smile that mystified him. "Captain Cutlass, I am unarmed and your prisoner, not your passenger. Listen to me. There is coming for last night's work a day of vengeance whose retribution will make the heavens dark. You say you will land me in Cartagena, but I will not stay there."

"It is your home."

"Nay! My home is on the sea—on your pillage-ground!" the girl retorted quickly. "The drama which opened with a dead man lashed to a raft will close with a scene more startling than that."

"Then, by Jove! I had better not land you at Cartagena!" cried the buccaneer.

"Please yourself. I need not be consulted," said Lona. "I care not where you land me, or whether you decide to carry me with you wherever you sail the waters in search of human prey and golden treasure. The end will be the same. Your decision, whatever it is, will not abate my vengeance one jot! I believe that you are not afraid to convey me to my old home."

"No! I have sworn to plunder it."

"I know that, and the man you sent adrift on the raft had sworn also that your attack should end your career."

Captain Cutlass smiled as the recollection of his inhumanity came back to him.

"What took my father from Cartagena?" asked Lona eagerly.

"I do not know. The ship that carried him was bound to Porto Bello."

"He was hastening to me!" exclaimed the girl, and she took a mad stride toward the buccaneer: "And you stopped him!"

For a moment she stood before the Vampire's captain, all the revenge of her nature boiling in her bosom, then she turned suddenly away.

"Go! leave me!" she cried. "The planks you tread groan under the weight of your crimes. Take me to Cartagena, or to some lone island in mid-sea—I care not where; I will live for vengeance. Down upon your head, Captain

Cutlass, pest of the tropic seas, I call the vengeance of Heaven long delayed!"

She looked like an insulted queen of tragedy in the presence of the buccaneer.

Her look and quivering finger were enough to make him recoil.

"I will send the colonel down to you," he said smiling.

"Do! Throw into my cabin a nest of serpents; only leave me yourself. As for Colonel Cristo, I will welcome him. Always welcome to a lady is the man she loves."

Why did Captain Cutlass start at the last sentence?

Could it be that Lona Seward loved the dark-eyed Frenchman? No; she was trying the buccaneer.

He did not stop to irritate her further with his presence, but hastily left the cabin, to hear the door shut madly behind him.

"What! has he gained her heart for all?" he said to himself as he walked away. "By the heat of Hades! I will see who wins in this ocean game of hearts."

Three minutes later he appeared on deck, and in his blind rage almost ran against the colonel.

"You are under arrest!" he thundered, as Colonel Cristo turned white. "Go to your cabin and remain there. If you show yourself outside of it, I'll hang you at the Vampire's yard!"

These ferocious sentences seemed to glue the bloodless colonel to the floor of the deck.

"In the name of heaven, captain, what have I done?" he stammered.

"You've done enough!" was the flashing retort. "Yonder's the ladder, and you know where the cabin is. Here, Lieutenant Dramon, accompany this Paris edition of treachery to his room, and place a guard over him. He'll be lucky if he ever gets to attend mass in Cartagena."

Colonel Cristo did not move till the hand of the Vampire's lieutenant touched him; then he shook it loose.

"I demand to know—"

"You demand on this ship?" was the interruption. "To the cabin with him, Mr. Dramon, and then superintend the construction of a raft!"

The heart of the Frenchman sunk within him.

CHAPTER V.

A SPANIARD'S COMPLIMENTS.

THE sun rose higher and higher, burnishing the waves that danced about the Vampire's keel, and lending to them a glare that dazzled the eyes.

Toward evening the wind, which had been fresh and hope-giving, suddenly died away, and the sails of the buccaneer flapped no longer around her masts.

Instead of night bringing on a new breeze, it brought a dead calm, so that the ocean pest lay steady in the moonlight, while Captain Cutlass, in no good mood, cursed the unpropitious hour.

The calm became so monotonous as the hours crept on that the crew grew uneasy and more than ever superstitious.

Captain Cutlass, in his angry mood, drove every one below, and took his station on the quarter-deck with a night-glass in hand.

Alongside of the Vampire rested a rather singular craft about twenty feet square, with an upright mast in the center.

It was a raft which was rough and had been newly constructed.

"I won't send him adrift till a breeze strikes us," murmured the buccaneer captain as he glanced down at the raft as idle as his own vessel in the water. "He'll curse a blue streak and probably beg, but what of that? She has been foolish enough to declare that she loves him, and that's enough. When they get ahead of Captain Cutlass they get up before day-break."

"Sail ho!" rung out from the crow-nest overhead so suddenly that the Gulf buccaneer started and threw a quick inquisitive glance upward.

"Sail, the deuce!" he growled. "This calm extends for miles."

"Sail ho! off the starboard quarter!" was the answer.

"Do you see it?"

"Ay, ay, sir."

Captain Cutlass turned his glass in the direction indicated by the watch, and swept the vast stretch of sea that lay before him.

"Can you make her out?" he sent up to the watch.

"Not yet."

"Does she bear toward us?"

"She seems to be making dead toward the Vampire," was the answer.

Before Captain Cutlass could reply, a puff of warm wind struck his cheek and the sails fluttered as they were partly filled by the breath.

"That's what brings her on if she has the advantage of the wind," he said. "What course marks she now?"

"The same as before."

The buccaneer did not quit his tracks, but stood still and scanned the sea over his starboard, anxious to see the sail which had been reported by the watch.

He did not think for a moment that a vessel could be bearing down upon him with the speed indicated by the man in the crow-nest.

His name had terrorized not only the entire Gulf, but the Caribbean and the cities on the shores of both bodies of water.

He had been hunted, but not lately.

More than one chase after him had ended disastrously for his enemies, and he had added new power to the prestige of his infamous name.

Yet, here was a ship reported to be bearing down upon him, a ship unrecognized in the fantastic moonlight that painted with silver the crests of the waves brought into being by the wind which had just sprung up.

It was enough to render the buccaneer a trifle uneasy.

"What is she now?" he sent up to the watch in anxious tones after a minute's silence on his part.

"I can't make her out yet."

"Not yet?"

Captain Cutlass bit his lip behind his last words, and began to ascend to the lookout.

"I'll name her," he said, almost savagely to himself. "I don't claim to have night-eyes, but I'll make her out all the same!"

He reached the lookout's side, and gazed over his outstretched arm which pointed in a north-westerly direction across the sea.

"We're moving just a little, captain, but that ship is actually driving before the wind," said the sailor.

Captain Cutlass made no reply for a moment.

"By Jove! she will run afoul of us if she keeps on that way," he suddenly exclaimed. "Our sails begin to answer to the breeze that sends her along. We shall have a brush with some one within thirty minutes."

Captain Cutlass finished his last sentence abruptly and scrambled down on deck, where he found himself face to face with Lieutenant Dramon, an athletic fellow who would have been handsome if his one eye had not had a greenish glitter like a cat's.

"Station the gunners and open the arm-chests," he said to the officer. "We'll have another tussle within twenty minutes."

"With whom?"

"Heaven knows, and I don't care!"

The lieutenant walked away, and once more Captain Cutlass turned toward the strange sail which seemed to be in league with the supernatural powers so rapidly did it approach.

He could see the masts outlined against the moon, and now and then the night planet seemed to be blotted out by a sail.

He saw the boarders reach the deck and station themselves ready to obey his command, and at each heavy brass gun on the starboard side, stood men whom he could trust.

The silence of death reigned on board the Vampire, and the men said not a word when they saw Captain Cutlass swing himself to his accustomed place among the rigging in the prow.

"She comes on like a man rushing straight to doom," he said between his teeth as he turned to the strange ship now distinctly visible and bearing down upon him as if determined to strike him fairly regardless of consequences.

"Ready down there, all of ye!" he sent down below. "When I give the signal open on the sea fool with every available gun, and if that doesn't stop him, we'll blood his decks!"

A moment later the lookout overhead uttered an exclamation which found an echo on Captain Cutlass's lips.

"By Jove! she wears! She will pass us, crossing under our prow unless she veers again!"

The words of the lookout seemed to infuriate the buccaneer.

"What! is the stranger going to escape us?" he cried. "Am I going to miss a brilliant opportunity to show another sea-fly that my flag still rules the warm waters! Ready, down there!"

"Ay, ay; ready it is, sir!" came up from the deck.

The strange craft was now but a little ways from the Vampire, so near, indeed, that Captain Cutlass could see that it was near his own size and similarly built.

It was a moment of intense though suppressed excitement.

The gunners stood ready with matches held a few inches from the touch-vents, and the boarders, stripped to the waists, held their cutlasses ready for the expected onset.

Another minute would decide the question of superiority.

On, on came the stranger without a hail, but one was forming on the lips of the buccaneer.

Clutching a pistol in the hand that did not clutch the ropes, he leaned toward the ship with a wild glitter of fight in the depths of his orbs.

"Ship ahoy!" rung out in clear and distinct tones from his throat. "Who are you?"

At that moment, as if driven forward by the breath of some sea monster, the challenged vessel reached the Vampire and was passing on under her very prow as it were.

Captain Cutlass caught sight of a number of figures on the stranger's deck as he issued the call.

He saw one rush toward him pistol in hand, and heard the answer to his hail.

"This is the Ocean Huntress! Take my compliments, Captain Cutlass."

At the same time the heavy pistol of the speaker shot upward, and the last word was followed by a flash and a report.

The next instant the figure of a human being swayed to and fro among the Vampire's rigging, and while the crew stood spellbound about the guns, it dropped with a dull thud upon the deck!

Several men sprung forward and bent over the buccaneer.

"Riddle him!" he hissed. "By Heaven! it is Captain Fortuno and his accursed ship! Send him to the bottom of the sea!"

It was too late; the supreme moment had passed, and the Huntress—if Captain Cutlass had not mistaken the stranger's identity—was riding the sea some distance away.

"By the stars! he shall pay for his shot!" continued the buccaneer, who seemed to be seriously wounded by the shot which had tumbled him from the rigging. "Bring him to with the long Tom! Perdition shall welcome this Spanish dog before day!"

The stranger was still in sight, and a good target for an experienced gunner.

"I'll bring him to!" growled a lank fellow whose skin was the complexion of a Malay's as he bounded toward the long chaser which was elevated above the decks on a movable platform.

He was instantly followed by several of the crew who, with many an oath, helped him to bring the gun to bear on the ship, then—a loud report broke the sleeping echoes of the moonlit sea, and those who watched and listened heard the crash of the heavy shot in the side just above the water-line, and saw the next moment a dark gap where the well-aimed shot had struck.

"That'll either fetch him to or provoke a fight," grinned the gunner. "Ah! here it comes!"

The following second the side of the enemy seemed to be a sheet of flame and while the gunner's last sentence still sounded, a storm of iron crashed through the Vampire's rigging.

It made Captain Cutlass stagger to his feet and whirl upon the helmsman.

"One of us goes to the bottom to-night!" he flashed in a madman's voice. "Steer straight toward the Spanish cur, and we'll make this episode a death-grapple. Forward for victory or death!"

The crew of the buccaneer gave a wild cheer, and the ship, answering the helm with almost human eagerness, swept forward, with her mad captain a statue of fierceness in the moon-cast shadow of the mainmast.

CHAPTER VI.

BARELY IN TIME.

WAS it true that the stranger ship was the same vessel we have lately seen dismantled and sent adrift by the commands of the buccaneer of the Gulf?

We know that Captain Cutlass called the man who shot him in the rigging Captain Fortuno, and this was the name of the commander of the Red Mogul, or Ocean Huntress.

What had transpired if the two ships had met again?

Who had snatched the match from the trail that led to the magazine of the Huntress?

Let us see.

True it was that Captain Cutlass had taken pains to rid the seas forever of the Spanish captain who had sailed them for years despite the terror the name of Cutlass inspired.

When the two ships separated in mid-gulf after the bloody contest on the Spaniard's decks, it was with terrible doom overshadowing the one.

Lying bound on the upper deck among the dead who had fallen in the desperate hand-to-hand encounter, were Captain Fortuno and his men.

They could curse the sea villain who had sent them adrift, but they were powerless to help one another.

Below, in one of the cabins, a young man walked to and fro like a caged tiger, his hands bound on his back, and with fire in his eyes.

This individual was Roland Manton, the young American officer of the Huntress.

A blow on the head from Colonel Cristo's sword had rendered him unconscious, and when he recovered he found himself lying on the floor of his cabin with his hands tied, and practically helpless.

He heard the wild cheer of the buccaneers that announced the wind-up of the conflict on the upper decks, and after awhile he felt the Huntress moving away, slowly it is true, but still moving.

He inspected the door of the cabin, and found it locked, as he expected.

He was a prisoner, and with the belief that he was the sole survivor of the encounter.

Of course, he did not know that Captain Fortuno and his crew were bound captives in their own ship.

Meanwhile, in a corridor that ended at the door of the vessel's magazine, burned a match, or fuse, which the buccaneer had lighted for their destruction.

It burned slowly, throwing out flashes of light here and there, as it crept like a hissing serpent toward the powder store.

Inch by inch the fire advanced, shortening each second the lives of the men on deck.

Roland Manton knew nothing of this.

A prisoner in his own cabin, he was ignorant of Captain Cutlass's crowning act of infamy.

A breeze that sprung up shortly after the fight sent the Huntress through the water with some spirit, notwithstanding her crippled condition; it also cooled the cheeks of the men lying on deck.

The young lieutenant tried his door as best he could.

He bestowed upon it sundry kicks which had no effect, and at last he went back to a chair, upon which he threw himself with a mad curse.

In a chest that stood open in one corner of the cabin lay a hatchet, which he could gaze upon and grate his teeth, but which he could not touch.

It seemed to mock him with a smile, and maddened him almost beyond endurance.

With the hatchet in his possession, he could cut his way to the deck.

"I will escape!" he exclaimed. "By Heavens! I owe this sea-crab a debt which my bonds shall not keep me from paying."

The lid of the chest was bound with brass, and having shut it with his foot Manton put his hands upon the metal and began to see-saw on the ropes that secured them.

It was slow work, but he worked with the feelings of a desperate man, without apparently making the least impression on his bonds.

"I'll try till daylight," he said with resolution. "This is my only hope. The brass binding of my chest must save my life."

For more than an hour Manton kept in a position that cramped him, but he worked on his bonds with the pertinacity of a hero.

Would they never part?

Was he to die the most horrible of deaths, cooped up in a vessel doomed to drift for months perhaps at the mercy of wind and wave?

In his wildest dreams of peril on the sea, he had never seen the shadow of such a fate.

He worked on, despairing not.

The brass rim of his chest did not seem to take hold on the ropes, and he could not see what progress he had made.

At last, however, a sudden thrill went to his heart.

He sprung up with a cry of victory, and jerked his arms apart!

He was free so far as the little area of his cabin was concerned.

His first impulse was to rush to the hatchet, seize it and cut his way through the door which he knew had been secured from the outside.

But he needed rest before beginning the attack.

Ah! if he could have seen the fuse burning toward the magazine of the ship, there would have been no rest for him.

Five brief minutes, and precious ones they were for the Ocean Huntress, seemed to rest him completely.

"Now for the good sea air!" he exclaimed.

The lid of the chest flew open, and a minute later the young lieutenant struck the first blow on the door.

Again and again he drove the heavy hatchet deep into the planks, working with the energy of a man determined to win in the desperate fight before him.

The interior of the cabin was not dark, for those who had bound him had left him a lighted lantern suspended from a beam overhead.

It did not take Manton long to cut through the cabin.

He dealt blows that told visibly on the wood, and at last he sprung through the opening he had made.

A loud ejaculation of triumph burst from his throat as he rushed toward the ladder, up which he went with the agility of an acrobat.

"I'll navigate this ship if I'm the only man on board!" he said to himself. "The day will come, Captain Cutlass, when you will curse yourself for having spared my life!"

When he reached the still slippery deck of the Huntress a sight for which he was not prepared burst suddenly upon his vision.

"Santissima! is it you?" cried a voice from a group of recumbent figures on the moonlit planks.

"Captain Fortuno!"

Manton sprung forward as he uttered the name and bent over the captain of the Huntress.

"Thank fortune!" he ejaculated. "There are two of us now. Let the Sea Spider look to the web he spins!"

The eyes of the Spanish captain flashed.

"Did you trample out his infamous fuse?" he asked.

Manton leaped erect.

"What fuse?" he cried.

"The one that creeps toward our powder!"

"Heavens, no!"

The next instant the lieutenant of the Huntress was flying below.

"The infamous wretch! Would he consign us all in a flash to the depths of the sea?" he cried. "The fuse! The fuse! My God if it should reach the powder, we would die in a second!"

He lost no time in getting below, and rapid bounds carried him toward the magazine where was stored enough powder to blow the vessel into strips.

It was the most exciting moment in the American's life.

He gained the narrow corridor that led to the store-house, and almost recoiled as his eyes caught sight of a spark that danced on the floor some distance ahead!

He knew the imminent danger then.

There were particles of powder on the floor near the magazine, and at any moment they were likely to be ignited by the fuse that seemed intent on carrying out Captain Cutlass's designs.

Roland Manton did not hesitate.

He knew that the terrible fuse had burned to within a few inches of the door of the magazine, that the existence of ship and crew might be numbered by seconds.

A great bound carried him toward the dancing light, for at times the burning fuse threw out little showers of sparks.

He saw nothing but the accursed fire!

All at once he brought one foot down upon it, and crushed it out of existence in the twinkling of an eye!

He had not a moment to spare, for when he thrust his hand forward it entered at the open door of the magazine, and he felt the fuse beyond it!

He had reached the spot in the nick of time!

For several minutes Manton stood amid the darkness that enveloped him.

The fuse had been entirely extinguished, and he withdrew it from the magazine and coiled it about his hand.

"I'll save it for you, Captain Cutlass," he said, taking delight in his own words. "Now I will release the captain."

Once more he went up on deck, and a knife cut the cords of the men bound there.

"Now for vengeance!" grated the Spaniard.

"This vessel shall be what the young lady christened her—the Ocean Huntress. I have suffered a thousand deaths since I was bound, for Captain Cutlass's last words told me about the fire creeping like a serpent toward our powder. When we meet the Sea Spider, let him look to his villainous web. We are dismantled; but what of that? I have about me men enough to man the Huntress, and the winds of heaven will blow us to the man we seek!"

Captain Fortuno ordered the dead to be removed from the deck, and afterward the crew fell to work to repair as best they could the damage wrought by the enemy.

They rigged up masts sufficient to carry a good deal of canvas, and at the end of several hours a breeze that seemed providential filled the sails, and drove the Huntress through the waves as if vengeance steered her.

"At this speed we would overtake the Flying Dutchman," said Manton to Captain Fortuno.

"It is vengeance that fills our sails," was the reply.

CHAPTER VII. CHECKED AT LAST.

HAVING acquainted the reader with the somewhat thrilling circumstances that made it possible for the Ocean Huntress to come up with Captain Cutlass, when that individual fondly believed her torn to pieces and at the bottom of the Gulf, we will go back to the two vessels.

Wounded and bleeding, the buccaneer was eager to close with the Spaniard, to pay him for the shot which had tumbled him headlong from his rigging.

Quietly awaiting the onset, the Ocean Huntress with sails suddenly furled so as to slacken her speed, appeared in full view, as eager as Captain Cutlass for the encounter.

Only three of the shots delivered by the Spaniard's broadside had taken effect in the Vampire's sides; the others had crashed through the rigging, hurling a few spars to the deck, and riddling the canvas.

The broadside had not spilled a drop of blood. Captain Cutlass kept on expecting another hail-storm of iron, but what did he care.

He intended to keep his vow that one of them should go to the bottom.

All at once a single shot boomed over the water, and the men who were watching Captain Cutlass saw him leap into the air, and, falling suddenly back, stagger toward the main hatch.

"My God! the captain's dead!" cried Lieutenant Dramon, bounding forward.

"Dead? No!" grated the captain of the Vampire. "Forward the death-grapple! Boarders to the fore! Get ready the grappling-irons! Prepare to board!"

These commands followed one another with startling rapidity as the buccaneer who had been winded by a cannon-shot, recovered almost before Lieutenant Dramon reached him.

"The enemy's swinging round again for another broadside," said Dramon.

"What of it? The fishes of the Gulf will get one or both of us!" was the retort of the infuriated buccaneer. "Forward the Vampire, helmsman; straight at the Spawn of Spain!"

Loud and clear from the helmsman came an "ay, ay, sir," that inspired Captain Cutlass, and the Vampire seemed to shoot along the surface of the water.

The man looked like a human tiger as with bloody face, wild eyes and blood-sprinkled velvet uniform, he stood on the deck of his famous ship, cutlass in hand, ready to lead his desperate boarders over the sides.

Another minute would decide all.

Suddenly the side of the Huntress again burst into flame as it were, and the Vampire seemed lifted from the water by the balls that hit her hull.

A number of iron globes swept across the deck, and the ready boarders tumbled in every direction.

It made Captain Cutlass grind his teeth.

The next moment the Vampire dashed into the heavy smoke, and in another second had actually reeled back, for the cannon that had opened on her sent their balls clear through her body.

"Death to the sea spawn!" cried a loud voice beyond the smoke. "Prepare to repel boarders! Remember the lady's oath, Serpents of the Sea. Down with the curse of the Gulf!"

The speaker was the Spaniard, Captain Fortuno, and as he finished the last cry the Vampire struck him aft the mainmast, and as she swung round, the buccaneers with yells of fury began to lash the two ships together.

"Let me lead the boarders," said the young man who appeared suddenly at Captain Fortu-

no's side. "I long to meet this infamous Gulf pest."

There was no reply for the Spanish captain turned to issue another command, and Manton the young American officer sprung away.

"Follow me! I will lead you!" he cried to the sailors armed to the teeth and eager to be led to the combat which was to settle to a great extent the supremacy of the tropic waters.

Away went the whole lot led by Manton who reached the side of the ship just as the boarding planks of the pirate bridged the watery chasm between them, and a second later they were rushing to the hand-to-hand encounter.

Manton's gallantry took the buccaneer completely by surprise, and the impetuosity of the young leader and his followers for one brief moment appeared to stun the Gulf pest.

They had not trod the planks a yard before they beheld Manton and his men rushing down upon them with wild yells and shining cutlasses!

Captain Fortuno had attempted to forestall Manton in leadership, but the American was too quick for him, and the captain of the Huntress was forced to follow where he hoped to lead.

Like men bent on vengeance, the sailors of the doomed ship poured over the boarding-planks, led by the young American who was the first to drop on the Vampire's deck, where cutlasses as keen as his own awaited him.

"Death to the Spanish dogs!" rose above the decks of the buccaneer to be answered with: "Down with the Spiders of the Sea!"

The shock of encounter was terrible.

Espying Captain Cutlass, Manton made a dash for him and soon had him before his point.

"Yield!" cried the American. "I have you where hundreds have wanted you these many months—at my sword's point!"

The young lieutenant saw the buccaneer's eyes flash fire.

"Yield to you, American cur?—never! Captain Cutlass never surrenders!"

"Then, by heavens! he dies!" cried Manton, and striking down the cutlass of his enemy, he threw his own blade madly above his head for a deadly stroke.

Ere it could be dealt, however, a stalwart figure leaped between the two men regardless of the cutlasses, and struck down Manton's arm.

"Fairweather Tom! This is not your interference!" said Manton madly, as he recognized the man who had thrown himself between.

"Never mind; this sea robber is wanted elsewhere," was the reply, and a moment later the captain of the Vampire found himself disarmed and the Yankee sailor's prisoner.

Manton's madness would have impelled him upon Captain Cutlass despite the protection afforded by Tom's strong arms.

"You forget the fuse that was lately burning toward our powder," he said to Tom.

"I forget nothing, Roland," was the answer. "There's a great reward for this sea crab at Cartagena."

"You can never get him there."

"I'll try," was the resolute reply. "We've got the ship, haven't we?"

Without answering Manton turned to watch for a moment the progress of the fight.

In all his cruises and wild exploits on the wave, Captain Cutlass had never been boarded before, much less made prisoner.

Desire for vengeance had made tigers of the Spaniard's crew, and the vampires found themselves no match for them, especially since Captain Fortuno, a veritable lion, had placed himself at their head, and was directing the terrible encounter in person.

The pirate crew were driven aft, but inch by inch over the slippery decks.

"Down with the Sea Spiders!" was the cry that constantly soared above the heads of the contestants.

At last the battle came to a close, and when Captain Fortuno turned to face his enemy, he found the giant physique of Fairweather Tom barring his way.

"He goes to Cartagena with us, captain," said the Yankee sailor, with resolution. "I will defend him with my life, much respect for you."

Captain Fortuno stopped short and looked into Tom's eyes; then he glanced at Captain Cutlass who, proud and defiant, stood beside the sailor with arms crossed upon his chest.

"Well, captain, do you want to go to Cartagena?" he asked.

"I'll go anywhere," was the answer. "I am not afraid to meet the people of that city."

"They've outlived you."

"So they have! And I've had vengeance, too. The flag of Colombia has been lowered to

me time and again on the Caribbean. I have humbled the pride of their best captains, and the bluest blood of Cartagena has flowed when my cutlasses struck. Oh, no, Captain Fortuno; I'm not afraid to go to Cartagena."

The captain of the Ocean Huntress allowed a smile to wreath his lips.

"I waive all rights to pay you in the coin of the high seas," he said. "You shall go to Cartagena, Captain Cutlass, but not on the deck of the vessel with which you have swept the waves. Your free flag falls to-night never to rise again, and the flames that have served you so often will serve Captain Fortuno with alacrity. Holy Dios! This is an hour that tingles my very blood with triumph!"

Dark as a thunder-cloud grew the face of Captain Cutlass, as the Spaniard turned away.

Suddenly his hand closed on Fairweather Tom's arm and he said as their eyes met:

"Give me freedom for one minute and your cutlass for half that time," he hissed. "By the sea stars! I will show this Spanish hound that he shall never hand me over to the council that made me an ocean outlaw!"

Of course he was not accommodated in his mad desires, and Captain Fortuno, who overheard him, threw a sarcastic look at him, while Tom, the sailor, seized his wrist and held him back.

During this time where was Manton, the young American?

His first thought after the battle was of Lona Seward, and he was not long in going below in search of her.

The interior of the buccaneer was new to him, but he soon found the cabins and knocked at the door of one which he had an idea might be the girl's quarters.

He was not mistaken, for a quick footstep came to the door and Manton spoke the beauty's name.

"With friends again, thank Heaven!" was the fervent response as Lona recognized the American's voice. "Indeed, sir, I cannot admit you, as I am a prisoner in my quarters."

Manton gave vent to an ejaculation of rage.

"Stand aside, please," he said.

The next moment he stepped back and was about to throw himself against the door, when a human figure fell against him, and a pair of arms went round his body.

"Not yet, my young fellow," was spoken at his ear. "I thought we had made sure of you all with a lighted fuse, but here you are alive."

Manton knew the speaker; it did not take the look he gave him to establish his identity.

Once seen, Colonel Cristo, the Frenchman, was not likely to be forgotten.

The American lieutenant's eyes grew flashing under the colonel's words.

"I am here, and I thank fortune that we are face to face," he cried.

The Frenchman laughed, but the following instant his merriment grew still, for Manton had wrenched himself from his grasp.

"Now, sir, we'll test our blades again!" cried Manton, and before Cristo could lift a hand he received a blow that sent him reeling away.

CHAPTER VIII. THE LION'S DEN.

THE French colonel's reappearance had roused all the lion in Manton's nature, and the young American was determined to pay him for the indignities received at his hands.

The stroke dealt with the flat of the sword sent Cristo against some loose planks in the half-darkened corridor, and caused him to fall with a noise that brought several sailors upon the scene before Manton could follow up his success.

They instantly threw themselves between the two men, and against the lieutenant's remonstrances prevented him from finishing the colonel then and there.

"Very well!" said Manton, with a look of hatred at Cristo as he turned to the door of the young girl's prison. "I trust we shall meet again when there will be no interference."

The look he got in return told him that the Frenchman longed for another meeting, and as he was taken in charge by the sailors, Manton threw himself against the door and sprang over it into Lona's presence.

With a pair of bright eyes full of thankfulness for her deliverance, the soldier's daughter awaited the American, and her happiness was increased ten-fold when she learned that Captain Cutlass had been taken prisoner.

But her countenance fell for a moment when she was told that Captain Fortuno had decided

to convey his distinguished prisoner to Cartagena, there to answer for his crimes on the sea by the council that had outlawed him.

"The council will avenge you," Manton said to the young girl. "I assure you that the depredations of Captain Cutlass are at an end at last."

"Yes, but I will not be permitted to strike for my father," she said quickly. "The Council of Cartagena cannot fully avenge me. Where is this infamous scourge of the seas?"

She started toward the door with the intention of seeking the deck, but Manton's hand closed gently on her arm.

"Let him go for the present," he said. "Remember that he is the captain's prisoner."

"I remember only the murder of my father!"

"I do not ask you to forget that, for that were impossible," Manton replied. "What! are we moving already?"

The ship was certainly in motion, and bidding the fair girl remain in the cabin, which should be a prison no longer, Manton hastened up on deck.

The two vessels had been cut apart, and he saw at once that in the hurry of the moment he and Lona had been forgotten.

Already a goodly distance intervened between the Vampire and Huntress, and Manton's eyes flashed fire at the abandonment.

"What infernal treachery is this?" he cried. "Can it be that Captain Fortuno has deserted me?—and for what?"

He was answered sooner than he expected, and in a happy manner, besides, for he suddenly caught sight of several boats in the water, and the voice of Fairweather Tom struck his ear.

"Ahoy thar, lieutenant!" laughed the Yankee sailor. "Shiver my spars! if we didn't think you an' the lady war on board the Huntress till we counted noses. We've got ter save yer quick, for the Vampire's on fire in her hold."

Manton started.

The ship on fire?

He lost no time in seeing Lona and her baggage transferred to the boats that had come back for them, and dropping into one himself, he gave orders for ail to pull toward the Huntress.

Events that followed quickly on the heels of the opportune rescue told that it had not been effected a moment too soon, for flames burst suddenly above the buccaneer's deck, and the journey to the Huntress was continued in their lurid glare.

Standing on the deck of the Spanish ship, with eyes flashing like mad stars, was the man who, in the vessel rapidly approaching destruction, had made himself a veritable terror of the seas.

Not a muscle moved as he watched the flames leap up the tall masts of the Vampire and jump from sail to sail as they licked them up.

It was a sight which he had never expected to witness, but he was equal to the occasion.

"I'll pay 'em all back for this!" he murmured, though his lips hardly moved to shape the words. "I am still Captain Cutlass, and whether on land or sea, I am a tropic tiger."

Suddenly a sullen sound came over the water, a mass of sparks leaped skyward, and then settled back to disappear on the waves.

It was the end of the Vampire, for the fire had reached her magazine, and her flag came down with the sparks that closed her career of blood and pillage!

Captain Cutlass turned away as the sudden flash went out.

"What do you think of it?" asked a voice at his elbow, and he turned to look into the triumphant eyes of his sea-rival, the Spanish Captain.

For a moment the two captains looked at one another, and seemed like tigers about to leap to the fierce encounter.

"I am going to Cartagena, am I not?" suddenly asked the buccaneer.

"To Cartagena," echoed Captain Fortuno bowing slightly.

"Very well. Let the future tell what I think of this night's work."

And with the last word Captain Cutlass walked unguarded toward the main hatch.

A fearless smile played with the lips of the Spanish captain as he watched the figure of his prisoner disappear.

"Cool as a tempered blade," he said to himself. "He hopes to win yet, despite his misfortunes; but his crest is shorn. Ah! Captain Cutlass, you are to die in Cartagena!"

Having transferred from the Vampire some needed material which helped to make the Ocean Huntress almost whole again, Captain

Fortuno was able to push rapidly through the waves.

He had apologized for leaving Manton and the young girl in the pirate ship, and his dead and wounded had been buried and cared for.

The prisoners had been sent to the hold where they were closely guarded, Captain Cutlass, on account of his importance, being the only one honored with a separate apartment.

Colonel Cristo, much against his will, was thrown in among the common lot, where he constantly threatened Captain Fortuno with the vengeance of his Government for the indignity.

Nothing of an exciting nature happened on board the Huntress during the remainder of the voyage.

Assisted by favorable winds and good seas, Captain Fortuno had the satisfaction of reaching at last the harbor of Cartagena, the most important city of the Republic of Colombia.

As the forts saluted the Huntress, a dark-faced and handsome man in her cabin started toward the door with clinched hands.

"Well, here we are!" he said fiercely. "This is Cartagena, and I am a prisoner. Very well, Captain Fortuno. Rejoice in the day that marks your victory, for by the eternal stars! these waters shall yet be cursed by the presence of another Vampire!"

Need we say that the speaker was Captain Cutlass?

The sun was sinking behind the waves when the Huntress came to anchor under the guns of the forts.

Eager to announce the news of his capture, the Spaniard leaped into a boat and pushed toward the city.

Cartagena then was a city of twenty thousand inhabitants and one of the most important maritime towns of South America.

It had a history bristling with warlike events and was a place of much wealth and power.

Strong fortresses guarded its several harbors, for more than once ships-of-war had attacked it and the authorities had resolved to make themselves secure.

Captain Fortuno knew just where to go with the important information he had brought to the town.

His step was light, and his face was flushed with triumph.

He had returned to Cartagena at a lucky hour.

The Council of Safety was in session in the large stone palace that fronted the largest square of the inland town, and thither the Spaniard directed his steps.

Darkness was rapidly settling over harbor and town, but the Spaniard had been seen, and there was a crowd of excited people at his heels.

He walked on, appearing to take no notice of the uproar, but more than once he glanced back on the crowd as if in search of some particular person whom it was evident, from his look, that he did not see.

The figure of the captain was passport enough for the well-dressed guards, whom he encountered on the steps of the palace, and he passed down the corridor toward the council-room.

Five minutes later he threw wide a carved door, and burst in upon the thirteen handsome men, who almost leaped from their chairs at sight of him.

"Fortuno!" cried one. "Captain Fortuno has come back to be our avenger!"

The Spaniard made no reply, but those who looked into his face must have seen that he was there with news, not to receive a commission.

"Do you not know what has happened?" continued the member of the council. "Five days ago the Seraph of the Sea left Cartagena bound for Porto Bello. She carried out with her Major Seward, the American, and a member of this august body. In mid-sea the Seraph was caught by that ocean curse, Captain Cutlass, of the Vampire, and Major Seward was tied naked to a raft and sent adrift to die. We have this terrible tale from the lips of a survivor who was picked up the next day by a vessel and carried to Cartagena."

A smile appeared on the Spanish captain's face when the speaker concluded.

The whole body noticed it, and sprung up, indignant.

"What! do you smile at Major Seward's fate?" cried one. "We have spoken of you as our avenger—we have—"

"I have already avenged you!" interrupted Captain Fortuno. "Men of Cartagena, the Red Mogul, now the Ocean Huntress, lies under the guns of your forts, and a captive on board is the pest of the Gulf!"

"Captain Cutlass?" ejaculated the thirteen.

"Captain Cutlass!" said the Spaniard proudly.

It took the Council of Safety a moment to realize the importance of the capture; when it did there was a rush toward Captain Fortuno.

"Don't thank me for his coming," he said, waving them back. "You owe his presence here to an American sailor on my ship—Fairweather Tom. He wants the reward offered for Captain Cutlass of the Vampire."

"He shall have it!" was the quick response. "We will increase it if you say so, captain. But bring this man into our presence; yes, stand us face to face with Captain Cutlass, the demon of the Gulf."

"Remain in your seats, then. He shall stand before you as harmless as a lamb."

The members of the council returned to their places, and with a courteous parting salute Captain Fortuno turned away.

As he passed from the palace he was met by a crowd which the guards had to open with their bayonets.

"You'll know my news before you sleep," the captain said in response to the questions and cries that greeted him on every side. "San-tissima! it will make you drunk with joy!"

A moment later the crowd urged by the boisterous ones surged against him, and he felt a piece of paper thrust into his hand.

Instinctively he closed on it, and pressed on toward the boat that waited for him at the quay.

"What does this paper say?" he asked himself as he was about to step into the boat.

"Here, get me a light, Juan. I've got a message."

The sailor bestirred himself and produced a light by which Captain Fortuno eagerly devoured the contents of the paper.

His eyes glittered while he read as follows:

"The Serpent of the Tropics will sting to death the haters of Captain Cutlass. Let them hesitate before they throw him to the lions of Cartagena. Outlawed and a sea scourge, he is not friendless. Captain Fortuno, you stand in the shadow of death! Beware!"

All at once the Spaniard crushed the paper in his hand, and turned to the men in the boat.

"To the Huntress!" he cried. "Captain Cutlass shall be thrown to the lions, and I will crush the head of this Serpent of the Tropics! To the fires of Tartarus with the siren's threat!"

Did Captain Fortuno know the writer of the letter?

If he did, he did not quail.

CHAPTER IX.

MANTON IS ENTRAPPED.

PACING restlessly back and forth in one of the shaded parks or public gardens of Cartagena, the night after the events recorded in the foregoing chapter, might have been seen Roland Manton, the young lieutenant of the Huntress.

He was dressed in full uniform and wore an elegant sword at his side.

It was evident that he was there by appointment, for every now and then he would throw an anxious glance toward the main entrance to the park as if he expected some one.

The Huntress lay at anchor under the guns of the forts that guarded the harbor, and Captain Cutlass, the buccaneer king, was the inmate of a dungeon under the palace.

Captain Fortuno, defying the writer of the mysterious note of warning, which had been thrust into his hand, had kept his promise with the Council of Safety, and had delivered the scourge of the Gulf into their hands.

As for Colonel Cristo, he had declared himself a citizen of France, and, not being accused of any crimes against the laws of the Republic, had been released and given the freedom of the city.

Manton hastened to meet his old enemy, the Frenchman, immediately upon his release from custody, but arrived too late, and was forced to bite his lips in chagrin.

"Never mind!" he contented himself with saying, "one of these days, my good hater, I will pay old debts."

The opportunity promised to occur sooner than expected, for early on the morning after the Spanish captain's delivery of the buccaneer to the Columbian authorities, Manton received a sealed note on board the Huntress.

Believing it to be from Lona, who had taken up her residence with a relative, he quickly broke the waxen seal to read the following:

"MONS. MANTON:—I much regret that you failed to find me last night. If you will meet me in the Palma de Cera Garden at nine to-night, we will settle all our differences. COLONEL CRISTO."

That was enough.

The hour named in the challenge, for it was nothing more, found Manton in the Garden of the Palms, ready, ay, eager to accommodate the Frenchman with the kind of combat that suited him best.

It was for him, then, that Manton waited under the trees, and among the luxuriant clumps of wax-palms from which the public garden had taken its name.

He had seen the threatful note delivered to Captain Fortuno, and, with the Spaniard, had laughed it to scorn.

Manton believed that the so-called Serpent of the Tropics was a name coined to effect a purpose—the release of Captain Cutlass in order that he might renew his infamous depredations on the high seas.

"By Jove! if the owner of that title lives, I would like to see her," suddenly exclaimed the young sailor in the garden as he thought of Captain Fortuno's letter. "She might accommodate me with an interview while I wait here for Colonel Cristo. The Serpent of the Tropics, eh? Well, the tropics possess many poisonous reptiles, and—"

The American officer paused abruptly, and turned at a slight noise behind him.

The next moment he started back a pace and laid his hand on the hilt of his sword.

"You have just asked for me, American. I am here!"

Manton saw before him a woman as shapely as Lona, and strikingly beautiful.

Her short, close-fitting dress was nearly white, and embroidered with what appeared to be thread of gold.

Her face was well rounded, white and lovely, and a pair of eyes black as a dungeon's gloom, burned with singular brilliance.

Manton eyed this strange beauty for a moment, and then exclaimed:

"So you are the Serpent of the Tropics, eh?"

"I am!" and the eyes grew brighter still.

"American, do you expect to meet the Frenchman here, now that I have come?"

"Certainly, if he keeps his word. I have kept mine, you see."

"Very well. But I have decreed that you shall not meet him here unless—"

"Unless what?" interrupted the impatient sailor.

"Unless the council listens to me."

There was a strange tone to the last sentence. What had that woman to do with the Council of Cartagena?

"Ah! you are the person who had the letter placed in Captain Fortuno's hands," said Manton.

"Did you see it?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"We both treated it as it deserved to be treated; we laughed when we read it together."

Manton saw the woman knit her brows.

"I told him that if certain things were done, the Serpent of the Tropics would sting to death, didn't I?"

"Yes."

"Well, he knows already that I make no useless threats."

"Who knows?"

"Captain Fortuno, the Spanish dog!"

Manton sprung forward by sudden impulse.

"What have you done to him?" he cried.

"By heavens! woman though you are, you shall suffer if you have struck my captain."

The beautiful woman showed her pearly teeth in a fearless smile, but did not recoil an inch.

"What have I done with him?" she asked, looking up into Manton's face. "Dare you come with me and see?"

"I dare," was the answer.

"Then, to make sure that you will not give me the slip, I will introduce my guards," and the speaker turned and spoke two words in Spanish.

The next moment from the shadows of an enormous wax-palm sprung two huge male jaguars, who showed their teeth and glittering eyes to Manton as they crouched on either side of the Serpent of the Tropics.

"My guards! Ah! are they not beauties, señor?" cried the woman. "Come; we will find your captain."

The beasts leaped up and placed themselves uncomfortably close at Manton's heels and waited for their mistress's orders.

"This way," she said, to the astonished American, and the following moment she was leading him through the park and toward the rear entrance.

Without a word but with his eyes fastened

on the treacherous animals that followed cat-like at his heels, Manton kept close to the strange being who spoke not while she conducted him from the garden.

At length they struck one of the narrow streets of the city and passed down between the stone houses that lined it.

It was not late, but the inhabitants seemed to have retired, and Manton encountered no one.

Not once did the woman look back to see whether the American trod at her heels; she left all that to her jaguars who took delight in guarding Manton as they moved along.

All at once at last the woman turned into a street darker and still narrower than the one they had just traversed, and, after threading it a few rods, halted in front of a stone house that did not differ from its neighbors.

"Can it be that Captain Fortuno is in this part of the town?" said Manton, to himself, as he surveyed his surroundings in the starlight.

"By heavens! if evil has befallen him, I will make this tropic witch suffer for it in spite of her infamous guards."

He had just finished, when the door opened in response to the Serpent's manipulation of an iron key, and he was motioned to enter.

"I'll see this adventure through," he said between his teeth. "Darkness has no terrors for an American."

He was followed into the house by the woman and the jaguars, and the former took from a niche in the wall, which she revealed by opening a hidden door, a lamp which she held above her head.

"This way," she said to Manton, starting off toward the left. "I promised to take you to Captain Fortuno."

The young lieutenant did not hesitate, but cast one mad look at the jaguar guards and went on.

Five minutes later they all stood at the bottom of a flight of steps, and in front of a door which was fitted into a stone wall.

The light showed Manton the heavy lock and chain that secured it, and also the triumphant eyes of the Tropical Serpent.

He saw her unlock the door and throw down the chain that held the padlock up.

Then she spoke once to the jaguars and they came to the last step with eyes fixed on the door itself.

"Woe to the man who tries to come out when the door opens," said Manton under his breath.

A moment of suspense followed the movement of the jaguars, and then the door opened.

The Serpent of the Tropics held the little lamp above her head, and turned to Manton.

"Look!" she said. "You are not far from your captain."

Full of curiosity and burning with indignation, Roland Manton leaned forward, and tried to pierce the gloom of the dungeon before him.

"Go in and find him, señor!" suddenly cried the woman, and the next instant before the American sailor could help himself, he was pushed headlong into the darkness!

He heard a laugh behind him as he struck, and when he turned toward the door it was closed, and he was in the midst of pitch darkness!

"Entrapped! and like a fool, too!" cried Manton madly. "I have been lured to this place by an infamous lie—by a woman! Let me see; where is the door? By the eternal stars! this dungeon shall not hold me long!"

He began to search for the door, and, after a few trials, found it.

But it was locked and immovable!

As well might he have tried to move a tower of stone.

"I will see where I am, anyway," he said desisting and producing his tinder-box. "I'll give five years of life for a thrust at that siren's throat!"

He was not long in producing a light after the manner of the times, and soon held a little taper over his head.

His first glimpse showed him four walls of stone, but his second look showed him something more.

On the ground almost at his feet lay the figure of a man whose gold-embroidered coat drew a startling cry to Manton's lips.

The next instant he was stooping over the body, and his hands quickly turned it over.

"Captain Fortuno!" rose from his lips in startled tones.

Yes, Manton had found the captain of the Ocean Huntress.

The Serpent of the Tropics had not issued a foolish threat, and the American was ready to say that her sting was death.

CHAPTER X.

A LION IS TURNED LOOSE.

"Two fools for hostages!" ejaculated the black-eyed insnarer as she left the stone house with the two jaguars at her heels. "We shall soon see who is going to win in this game. The American will not fight the Frenchman to-night in the Palma de Cera Garden. I have blocked that little sport. Now for the boldest part of the battle!"

A few squares from the building beneath which was the dungeon that contained Manton and Captain Fortuno, the Serpent of the Tropics turned suddenly into a dark alley and disappeared.

When she came forth again after an absence of thirty minutes she was entirely alone; the jaguars no longer trotted at her heels.

The first half of the night was drawing to a close, but the woman seemed to know where someone was still awake, for she walked rapidly, and toward the palace.

Captain Cutlass and his men were to be formally summoned before the Council of Safety on the next day, and she and all Cartagena knew that an arraignment meant speedy death.

The captain himself had been sent to a dungeon somewhere beneath the walls of the palace, while the men, less important characters, in a certain sense, were confined in the regular prison.

"I will find him at his work," said the Serpent, as she neared the palace and saw a light in a certain window in one of the wings. "He always spends half of the night with his books prior to a great trial. Ah! he does not expect me, therefore the surprise will be greater."

She pressed fearlessly to the steps leading up the famous court of the palace and found no guard there.

The council had held its night session and adjourned, and with its members had departed the guards who flanked the doors during the deliberations.

She found the outer doors unlocked and passed unchallenged across the inner court to the council-room.

Slowly and without the least noise the woman pushed the door ajar, and looked into the lofty room, in the center of which sat a man at a table.

He was the only occupant of the place, a man of forty-five, rather portly and undoubtedly possessed of the strength of a giant.

The Serpent of the Tropics crossed the threshold and glided toward the man with a pair of glittering eyes fixed upon him.

He did not look up from his writing, for he did not hear her.

At last she stood beside his chair and looked over his shoulder.

She saw with flashing orbs a name which had just dropped from the writer's pen—Captain Cutlass.

All at once her hand went up, and the next moment dropped on his shoulder.

The Advocate of the Council, for he was this important personage, turned with a start and looked up into the Serpent's face.

"Yes," she said, with a smile, "it is I."

He made no reply for a moment.

"What brings you here?" he asked, when he spoke. "You are too late for the council. They have gone home."

"I have found the man I seek," was the reply. "Major Barro, I must see the man to be tried to-morrow."

"Not Captain Cutlass?"

"Captain Cutlass!" and the lips closed resolutely behind the name of the dreaded buccaneer.

The advocate looked into the depths of her dark eyes and slowly left his chair.

"I cannot grant your request," he said. "He cannot be seen—"

"By no one, eh?" smiled the tropic beauty.

"The council forgot me when those orders were issued. You will conduct me to Captain Cutlass."

The last sentence was spoken in a voice of command.

"I do not know about that," he said.

"I do! I have not entered the palace for nothing. Captain Cutlass shall know to-night that he will not be friendless to-morrow."

The speaker laid her hand on the advocate's arm as she finished.

"To the prisoner's quarters, sir," she continued, sternly. "Men call me the Serpent of the Tropics, and my sting is death!"

Was Major Barro, giant in stature, and strong enough to throw his caller through the window, awed by that voice and those flashing eyes?

The threat seemed to produce an immediate effect, for he said, considerably cooled down.

"I will let you see the prisoner, but to-morrow you will get the best view of him."

"Are they all to be arraigned at the same hour?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"At ten o'clock."

"Here?"

"In this chamber."

"What will the final verdict be?"

"Can't you guess?" smiled the advocate. "We have wanted those Gulf robbers a long time."

"Certainly; they will be condemned."

"There is not the slightest hope for one of them!"

A singular look of triumph lit up the Serpent's eyes as the advocate made reply.

He did not see it for her sweeping black lashes.

"Very well," she said. "They will meet their doom like brave men."

"Or like dogs!" sneered Major Barro.

"Let to-morrow decide; I am ready to see Captain Cutlass."

The advocate turned without speaking to a drawer in the writing-table, and took therefrom a bunch of keys with which he faced the Serpent.

"Now," he said, "we will see this pest of the seas."

The woman's eyes glittered anew as she started after him, and she murmured as she clinched her hands:

"Yes, Advocate of the Council, we will see Captain Cutlass; but one of us may not come back."

Major Barro led the Tropical Serpent to the underground corridors of the palace, and every now and then unlocked a heavy door with the keys he carried.

At last he stopped in front of one, and hung the lamp he carried on an iron hook at one side of it.

"We have reached the captain's quarters," he said with a glance at the Serpent, and she next moment he began to turn the key in the heavy lock.

With much impatience the Serpent watched him eagerly, her hands shut at her sides, and with flashes of fire in the depths of her eyes.

After a few seconds of toil with the key, the advocate pushed back the door, and the light that penetrated the apartment thus displayed, revealed a man standing erect in the cell, but chained to the wall behind him.

An exclamation of surprise burst from his throat when his eyes fell upon the woman who looked but did not speak.

"This lady wants to see you," said the advocate, addressing the buccaneer.

"Very well," said Captain Cutlass coldly. "But I wish she had not come."

The advocate and the Serpent started, the latter biting her lip till it bled.

Suddenly she started toward Major Barro and tore the heavy bunch of keys from his hands, then, in the flash of an eyelash, and before he could lift a hand, she dealt him an awful blow across the face with them, and sent him staggering into the cell.

"Another fool!" she ejaculated as the advocate sunk at the foot of the stone wall and caused Captain Cutlass to recoil with a cry to the length of his chain.

"Heavens! you have committed murder!" he said.

"Does that shock your sensibilities, Captain Cutlass?" was the quick retort. "Over the body of this man you walk to freedom."

"By your hands?"

"Yes; why not?"

"I have said that I would never accept a favor at your hands."

"You shall!" cried the Tropical Serpent.

"This is not my first stroke for revenge. Two men who helped sink the Vampire were housed by me forever from the sunlight before I came to you."

"Who were they?"

"Captain Fortuno and his American lieutenant."

"You haven't killed them, woman?"

"No, but they have read their doom ere this on walls of stone."

Captain Cutlass made no reply for a moment.

"Then, why do I want liberty?" he suddenly asked. "The man who burned the Vampire is out of my way. I wanted to strike him, but you—"

"He cannot be dead," was the interruption. "Stay here and face the council to-morrow;

then die! Walk from the palace to-night, and be still the king of the sea in a new Vampire!"

An exclamation of eagerness burst from the pirate's throat.

"I will!" he said. "I will make this haunt of my enemies tremble again at the mention of my name! Here, woman! Give me freedom, and I will give them—death!"

There was among the keys which had unlocked the numerous doors between the council-room and the dungeon, one that relieved Captain Cutlass of his chains, and the scourge of the Gulf stepped forward with an outburst of victory.

Then the iron door shut on the unconscious advocate, and the Serpent turned the key in the lock.

Ten minutes later the twain entered the council-chamber and passed through it to the darkened street beyond.

Captain Cutlass felt like giving vent to a shout of triumph.

"Free! Look out now, men of Cartagena! Within three weeks you will feel the hand you have spared too long. Where is your home?"

"Not very far away," said his deliverer.

"To-morrow all Cartagena will be looking for you."

Captain Cutlass's eyes suddenly flashed.

"Then, by heavens, I will make sure that there will be no traitors about!" he hissed. "Once before you betrayed me to my foes, but I escaped."

"I?"

"You—the Serpent of Cartagena!"

"I would die for you, Captain Cutlass."

"Don't try to hoodwink me, woman. I will find a hiding-place. Thanks for your help to-night."

His hand darted straight at her throat at the end of his last sentence, and the next minute the Serpent of the Tropics lay motionless at the foot of the wall of a stone house.

"Now I am free!" muttered Captain Cutlass as he turned away.

CHAPTER XI.

ONCE MORE AFLOAT!

WITH the dawn of another day Cartagena was thrown into a state of great excitement.

It was discovered that Major Barro, a distinguished soldier of the Republic and the Advocate of the Council of Safety, was missing.

Members of the council said that they left him in the palace when they left the preceding night, and his wife, a beautiful woman whom he had lately led to the altar, declared he had not come home.

What had become of the advocate?

As the search advanced some one made a second startling discovery.

The keys to the dungeons beneath the palace were missing!

Not until then was it dreamed that Captain Cutlass the captured buccaneer was in any way connected with Major Barro's disappearance.

The first door yielded reluctantly to the hammers of strong men, and the searching party advanced down the underground corridor.

Door after door was battered down, for the keys were not to be found.

At last the cell of the buccaneer was reached. The first blow brought a voice from the inside.

The men stopped and listened.

It was Major Barro, found at last!

This door yielded as the others had done, and the Advocate of the Council was dragged from what had almost been his living tomb.

In a few words he told the story of the pirate's rescue.

Suddenly the bells of the town were set going, word was sent to the commanders of the forts, and Captain Fortuno was hunted for.

Hunted for, but not found!

The people could hardly realize that Captain Cutlass had escaped and that on the very eve of his trial and condemnation.

Some professed to know the woman who had liberated him, and others declared that she had never been seen before in the town.

Standing at a window, and listening to the pealing bells that continually increased the excitement, was a pale but beautiful young girl.

"What! that red-handed monster at large again?" she suddenly exclaimed. "Well, I am not sorry, for I can throw myself on his track again, and pay him for the last crime committed on the wave. At liberty! Captain Cutlass, I can re-devote my life to the fulfilment of the vow taken on the deck of the Huntress. Rest assured that I would not turn you over to the men who hunt you high and low!"

All through the day the search for Captain

Cutlass and his deliverer continued throughout the town.

Every house was inspected; soldiers were everywhere.

"Another mystery has deepened since morning," said Lona's uncle, a fine-looking man of fifty, as he came into the room and found her still at the window. "The men of the Huntress can't find their chief officers. I have just conversed with one of them—an American called Fairweather Tom—who declares that his friend Lieutenant Manton has met with misfortune here in Cartagena."

The fair girl started at the mention of the lieutenant's name.

"Where is this sailor?" she asked eagerly.

"Somewhere on the hunt, I expect. He told me he would not give up the search until his friend is found. Ah! would to Heaven Captain Cutlass had never seen the light of day."

"I've echoed that prayer in my heart a thousand times," said Lona. "If he had never been born I would have a father to day; but I will find him!"

"You, girl?" ejaculated the surprised relative.

"I—Major Seward's avenger!" was the answer. "I know this American sailor. Tell me where you saw him last."

"Near the front gate of the Palma de Cera Garden. It was fully thirty minutes ago, and he announced himself on the way to get a bloodhound that belongs to a Spanish friend of his."

"The Palma de Cera, eh?" murmured Lona, moving from the room.

"Yes; but of course he is not there now."

"Never mind; I will encounter him."

"Not to-night; you are liable to insult. The escape of Captain Cutlass has maddened the people. They talk of assailing the prison that contains his sailors. Cartagena seems in a drunken frenzy."

"I will find him, anyhow," persisted the girl, her eyes glowing with determination.

She passed into an adjoining room, and ere she left the house armed herself with a pistol, which she concealed among the folds of her dress.

"Lieutenant Manton is my countryman and friend," she said to herself as she passed from the step into the street. "I owe him a favor for kindness received at his hands. Missing? That word means a great deal, these times, in this town."

Lona's prime motive in leaving her uncle's house was to find Fairweather Tom, in whom she reposed much confidence.

She had seen the giant tar on board the Huntress, had noticed that he was strongly attached to Manton, and knew that in him she would find an excellent and powerful ally.

The young girl had hardly reached the street when her ears were assailed by loud cries and the rapid discharge of pistols and muskets.

The next moment the head of a column of shouting men rushed into view and forced Lona into the mouth of an alley to escape being trampled under foot.

On came the crowd, yelling at the top of excellent lungs, and brandishing clubs and firearms over their heads.

"Let the 'tarnal fools go. I'll go and get my dog and track for myself."

Lona started at the sound of these words, and saw the stalwart speaker, who had halted within ten feet of her and was gazing at the mob, which was rushing furiously on.

Her heart seemed to leap into her throat.

"Thank heaven! I have found you again!" she exclaimed, springing forward and seizing the man's arm before he was aware of her presence.

"Lona, by Jupiter!" was the sailor's exclamation as he wheeled upon the girl. "Did ye see that mob of mad fools? They're goin' to break open the jail and make short work of the buccaneers."

The girl followed the crowd with her eyes before she replied.

"It's a terrible strong prison, Tom," she said, speaking almost unconsciously.

"But they'll get inside!" laughed the sailor. "Walls of brass couldn't hold that set of demons long in check. Listen at them, girl. Shiver my binnacle! if I don't wish they were goin' to break into where the lieutenant is."

A light cry parted the girl's lips at Fairweather Tom's reference to the missing American sailor.

"Then you have not found him yet?" she cried.

"I should reckon not. I know that last night

he was to have fought with that sneakin' frog-eater, Colonel Cristo, in the Palma de Cera."

Lona seemed to recoil an inch.

"With that infamous schemer?" she cried.

"Yes. How did I find it out? Well, I just choked it out of the rascal himself. When he got thar, he says, he didn't see anything of the lieutenant, and now he accuses him of cowardice. There's just where Cristo blisters his tongue with a lie!" continued Tom, his eyes flashing indignantly. "The man does not live that Roland Manton fears. I know that young Yankee like a book. When I get my dog— There! they're at the prison now."

Lona would have questioned Fairweather Tom about Manton's disappearance if he had not become absorbed in the work of the mad-dened mob which was hammering at the prison a few squares from the spot where they stood.

The night was clear and abundant with echoes, so that every blow, every shout and curse was borne distinctly to the listeners' ears.

"They'll make short work of the twenty-six buccaneers when they batter the doors off their hinges," said Fairweather Tom, with a glance toward the almost breathless girl. "I wouldn't give a marline-spike for the chances of the whole lot. Hark! there! there, Lona! They're inside now!"

Lona Seward was seized with a strange impulse to rush forward and witness the crowning work of the mixed mob.

Her temples throbbed, her blood rushed hot through her veins; she could not stand still.

All at once the wild din grew strangely still, but the silence was rudely broken by a cannon-shot from the harbor.

It seemed to lift Fairweather Tom off his feet.

"By Jupiter! that was the Huntress's long Tom!" he exclaimed. "We left only five men on the ship; the rest of us have been hunting the captain. There goes a broadside from the forts. In the name of reason, what has happened?"

More like a madman than one possessed of sanity, the Yankee tar rushed toward the quay that fronted the two forts built a short distance out in the harbor.

The whole town was echoing to the roar of the heavy guns, and while Lona, left alone, debated in her mind what to do, the mob came rushing back.

She knew at once from the cries that now rent the air that the assailants of the prison had met with disappointment, and she had but to listen a second to learn its nature.

The twenty-six buccaneers had effected their escape through an underground tunnel, so that the howling mob had reached an empty cell for all its labors!

It now bent its course toward the harbor and Lona found herself carried along with it by an excitement which she was unable to control.

All at once the head of the mob was arrested by the bayonets of a lot of soldiers, and the leaders recoiled, throwing the whole crowd into confusion.

"Ah, here you are!" said a voice at the girl's elbow and she recognized Fairweather Tom, the American tar. "The thing least expected has happened. By Jupiter! Lona, Captain Cutlass and his Sea Spiders are afloat again, and in the best ship that ever cut the waves—the Ocean Huntress!"

"Thank Heaven! then I can hunt him down!" cried the girl.

CHAPTER XII.

FAIRWEATHER TOM'S EXCITING TRAIL.

It was startlingly true that the buccaneer of the Gulf was once more afloat, and that in the very vessel which had gained the common enemy's first victory over him.

We have witnessed Captain Cutlass's escape from the dungeon under the palace, and in a line have explained the mystery of the empty cell that greeted the mob in the prison.

Fate had brought captain and crew together among the dark thoroughfares of Cartagena, and a successful attack on the poorly guarded Huntress was quickly planned.

The few sailors left on board made a weak defense, and the long gun which Captain Cutlass fired at the main fort told the exasperated people that he was afloat once more!

Fairweather Tom fumed, and used vigorous language when he learned that the sea pest had outwitted them all, but the triumph he had scored in taking the Huntress was doubly exasperating.

Then, too, the sailor was put in a fair way for losing the reward offered for the pirate's capture; the authorities would not like to pay it,

now that the captain had escaped, and was off again to renew his sea depredations.

"Got to sea and in the Huntress! May his victory be brief," growled Tom.

"It shall be!" said the beautiful girl who looked into his face while she spoke.

"There's no ship in the harbor capable of pursuing him, but that one lying under the guns of the fortress, and the authorities wouldn't let it leave for a mine of gold."

"Because the Government of Peru presented it to Cartagena?"

"That's it, Lona. They think she must lie thar and rot to the water's edge. That's South American spirit for you."

The girl did not speak, but looked toward the forts whose guns had ceased to waste powder on the desperate ocean outlaw who had outwitted them all.

"He shall be followed!" she said at last. "Is the Pearl of Peru ready for sea?"

"She's always ready, but there she lies," was the answer; "there she rots day after day. She's trim and well armed, but with no crew."

"With Captain Fortuno and the American lieutenant on her deck how she would fly over the waves!"

"Bet your bright eyes she would!" cried Tom. "Ah! I must find the captain and Manton. Let Captain Cutlass go for the present. I was on my way to find a certain trailer when I ran afoul of that pesky mob which, after all, accomplished nothing."

"Yes; they battered the prison doors off their hinges."

"And found the rat-hole that let the sea vermin out," smiled Tom. "Lona, go back home and wait for me. When I come I will have news of the young lieutenant."

"Do you promise me this?" exclaimed Lona, her eyes glistening, showing the interest she took in Roland Manton.

"I do. The trailer I am going to get will never leave the scent until he finds the officers."

The anxious girl held out her hand, which Fairweather Tom seized and raised to his lips, then dropped it quickly and darted away.

Almost immediately a woman who had watched the pair from the shadow of a building near by, started after him.

Her footsteps made no noise; she glided forward unperceived by Tom, who never looked back nor dreamed that he had a trailer.

Half an hour later the American sailor appeared in the Garden of Palms, accompanied by a huge bloodhound.

"Hit the trail, and off we go," he said to the animal. "If we find the officers in time, another ship will get under way before daylight, and the Cartagenians will be surprised again."

After awhile the dog seemed to strike a fresh trail in the depths of the park, and started off, followed by the sailor.

Out of the park he went, and down one of the dark streets of the town.

"Struck it finally!" cried the hero of the gun-deck. "When you get ahead of Fairweather Tom, just record it in your log, will you?"

Tom was certain that the hound had struck Manton's trail in the public garden, and was leading him to the place where the young man was.

He believed that both Captain Fortuno and the lieutenant had fallen into the snares of the enemy, who was, of course, friendly to Captain Cutlass, and feared that he would reach the two men too late to render them much assistance.

He pressed on, keeping as close to the dog as possible, and with his pistols ready for an emergency.

Suddenly the hound came back to him with a singular cry.

"What's ahead?" asked the sailor. "What kind o' craft have you steered afoul of? Come on. By Jupiter! we'll see what it is!"

Tom sprung forward, followed reluctantly by the dog, which, despite his name, exhibited signs of terror.

The next minute the tar came to a halt himself.

"What do you want?" demanded a stern voice from the step of a stone house. "You see that you have tracked dangerous game."

Fairweather Tom advanced a step forward before he made reply.

He had indeed encountered a formidable obstacle to a successful hunt for Manton, for he faced a strikingly lovely woman flanked by two jaguars who showed their flashing eyes and ferocious teeth.

Tom seemed to recognize the speaker in an instant of reflection.

"The Jaguar Queen Captain Fortuno fell in

love with when we were here before!" he muttered under his breath. "I haven't tracked the wrong person down after all. I'll wager my pay that somewhere behind her is the lieutenant."

"You'd better go back," said the Serpent of the Tropics. "Why didn't you remain on board your vessel and keep it from falling into Captain Cutlass's hands?"

"Because business of importance kept me here. Where's the captain?"

The woman's eyes seemed to blaze at this question.

"And the lieutenant, too?" continued Tom.

The reply was a glance at the jaguars crouched at her feet.

"Very well; I'll force my demands upon you," grated the sailor and the next instant his pistols covered the crouching cats.

"Where's the lieutenant?" he demanded. "Answer me, or by the beard of Neptune, I'll stretch your guards at your feet unfit for service."

"If you dare!" cried the woman. "Touch one of my pets and the American sailor rots where his captain is."

"We'll try it anyhow!" exclaimed Fairweather Tom. "I would as soon fight my way to the lieutenant as not. I'll open the fight with my stern-chasers from where I stand. Look out, my jaguar beauty!"

A moment later the report of a pistol rung out on the night air, and one of the beasts sprung up with a death-howl.

The woman sprang toward the door and seemed about to rush into the house.

"Halt!" cried Tom. "You're no better than the cat I've killed. When you rile Fairweather Tom, you shake up a typhoon. Halt! I say."

She turned with a half-tigerish growl and stood at bay.

"Where's the captain and his best officer?—Will you answer now?" said Tom.

"Ah! you have a good trailer at your feet," was the answer as the Serpent glanced at the bloodhound. "See! you have put an end to one of the best friends I ever had. Pedro my big jaguar is dead!"

"And the other one will follow suit unless I speedily find the lieutenant!" said Tom fiercely.

The Serpent of the Tropics saw the blazing orbs of the man who now covered the living jaguar with his loaded pistol; she saw, too, the steady hand that held the weapon.

"I count five for you, Queen Jaguar!" continued Tom. "Show me the trail to the lieutenant or lose the second game as you've lost the first. Here goes."

The Yankee began to count deliberately, and at the third numeral he saw the woman turn to the door.

The next second it flew open, displaying a room dimly lighted by a lamp that sat in a niche in the side wall.

"Find him! he is in there!" she said with a glance at Tom as she pointed inside. "I swear, American, that the two officers are under this roof."

"Alive?"

"Why not? I left them both so awhile ago."

The speaker made a movement to leave the spot, and Tom did not interfere.

"The Serpent of the Tropics will meet the jaguar's slayer again," she said fiercely.

"All right. Call on this Yankee at any time and you'll find him the most accommodating son of a gun you ever met. Take your jaguar with you; there's a good robe on his body. Ah! off you are, eh? Good-night!"

The discomfited woman made no verbal reply, but her looks were enough.

If they had been arrows, the sailor of the Huntress would have been transfixed in the twinkling of an eye.

He was eager to bound forward and search the stone house, which, like its immediate neighbors, seemed deserted, but he kept his position till the Serpent had moved away dragging her dead pet after her.

Then a bound carried Fairweather Tom across the threshold, and snatching the lamp from the niche he began his search.

Room after room he went through until the bloodhound which had guarded the entrance, came in and struck the trail to the underground apartment.

"At last!" cried Tom as he halted before the padlocked door. "If I find 'em dead inside, woe to the jaguar witch!"

He tried the heavy door but it was solid.

"Who is there?" came from the depths of the place beyond the portal.

"Tom himself. Ah! lieutenant, is it you?"

"Me and the captain."

"Thank fortune. I'll get in to you in a minute. I'm a thunderbolt when I'm stirred up."

The Yankee sailor went up the steps a piece, then turned quickly and hurled himself against the door.

To his astonishment it did not yield.

"I've got to have a battering-ram," he said to the prisoners on the inside, and up the steps he went.

As he reached the floor above, he heard a sudden growl, saw two flashing eyes, and felt the weight of a mad animal on his breast!

The dead jaguar's mate!

"I trusted the jaguar witch too far!" flashed across Tom's brain, and the next moment he went backward down the steps, feeling for his knife while the infuriated forest cat was at work on him with teeth and claws.

It was the most exciting moment in Fairweather Tom's adventurous career.

CHAPTER XIII.

HUNTERS AT HIS HEELS.

LUCKY was it for the Yankee sailor that he had a friend and ally at hand in the shape of the huge bloodhound which had guided him to the stone house.

All at once the dog took a hand in the mad conflict going on at the foot of the door, and the jaguar was forced to loosen his hold and to turn his attention to his new enemy.

This timely help gave Fairweather Tom a chance to get at his knife, and at the first opportunity he drove it hilt deep beneath the sleek skin of the spotted terror.

"That's what you get for coming back where you had no business," growled the sailor. "Mebbe your mistress is somewhere near. If she is, just let her interfere with my affairs and discover that she's waked up the wrong gundecker."

Tom found upon examination that his hurts were by no means serious notwithstanding the jaguar's mad assault, and assuring the two anxious men beyond the locked door that he was still in fighting condition, he started off again to find something strong enough to force the portal.

Fortunately he found by aid of the lamp an iron bar with which he returned to his task.

"When they baffle me they'll know it," he ejaculated, and he went to work at once on the door.

Five minutes' labor sufficed to prove that the portal of the underground prison was not impregnable, and as it was forced open two men sprung into the lamplight with exclamations of joy.

"By Jove! alive for a fact!" cried Tom. "Now, sir, we'll make the sea-trail hot for Captain Cutlass."

Captain Fortuno and Manton gave Tom looks of amazement.

"Call me a fluke if he isn't at sea again," continued Tom, "but that's not the worst of it. He's gone out with his same old crew in the Ocean Huntress."

"Gods, no!" cried Captain Fortuno. "I left him safe under the palace."

"And his twenty-six Sea Spiders in the strong prison of Cartagena," said Manton.

"Oh, yes; but hold such fellows long if you can," grinned Tom. "Who rescued Captain Cutlass?—who but the jaguar woman of this rascally place?"

Manton and his captain exchanged hasty and meaningful glances.

The latter shut his hands till they bled.

"She guarded me to that cell with her jaguars!" he hissed. "Fool-like, I allowed myself to fall into her snare; likewise Lieutenant Manton here."

Manton smiled.

"We are free now," he laughed, "thanks to Fairweather Tom."

"But our imprisonment has given Captain Cutlass the best ship that ever cut the waters of the Caribbean!" was the quick response. "Woe to that woman if I ever reach her! Once I thought I loved her; now I know I could throttle her."

Captain Fortuno looked like a madman.

"We heard the guns even in our prison," he said, "but heavens! we never dreamed that they announced Captain Cutlass's departure in the Huntress! What ships are in the harbor?"

"Only one that can follow with the remotest chance of success—the Pearl of Peru."

"The gift of Cartagena," said Manton. "The council will not let it go."

"Will not? It shall go despite forty coun-

cils!" flashed the Spaniard, as he started off. "On an occasion like this the council should be in session now."

"We will find them at the palace."

"Well?" and Captain Fortuno wheeled upon Fairweather Tom with a sternness that startled him. "I will face that council. Lieutenant Manton, you and Tom will collect your sailors and meet me in the Water Garden at the end of an hour. By the sword of the Cid! this ocean chase shall begin ere morning breaks!"

The captain of the Huntress did not give his companions a chance to reply, but left them to themselves without another word, and started toward the palace.

The most eventful night in the history of Cartagena had entered upon its last quarter.

Excitement had kept the people awake, and the streets were by no means deserted.

Captain Fortuno the Spaniard took note of no one as he hurried along, bent on having an interview with the Council of Safety which was holding a protracted and excited session in the palace.

All at once when least expected he burst into their midst like a thunderbolt, and stalked boldly to the center of the chamber.

"I know what has happened, but I could not prevent it," he said in reply to the questioning looks showered at him. "Captain Cutlass has escaped from the lion's den; he has reached his pillage ground in the best ship that ever flew the flag I serve. I have sworn that the Sea Spider shall perish in his web, that the waters shall be rid of their curse, that the crimes committed by Captain Cutlass shall be avenged on his own head!"

The council having recovered from the suddenness of the Spaniard's appearance, received his words with a shout.

"We shall appoint you avenger," said Major Barro, the advocate, still pale from his terrible experience in Captain Cutlass's cell.

"Good!" cried Captain Fortuno. "Give me what I want and I will throw Captain Cutlass into your clutches once more."

"What do you demand?"

"The Pearl of Peru—the vessel that lies equipped for the sea hunt under the guns of the forts."

The demand, astounding in its nature, seemed to drive every vestige of color from the faces of the members of the council.

A grim smile wreathed the corners of the Spanish captain's mouth while he waited for a reply.

"We cannot do that," said the major. "When we accepted the ship at the hands of our sister government, we agreed that it should ever lie in our harbor for defense only."

Captain Fortuno's black orbs flashed with sudden fierceness.

"To the winds with the letter of the agreement!" he said. "Captain Cutlass, boastful and victorious, is at sea. He has pulled the flag of Spain from my topmast and in its stead flies the pirate's pennon! To Hades with your agreement! Let me cut it with my cutlass. I will answer to Peru for its violation. Give me the armed vessel in the harbor, and ere morning dawns Captain Cutlass will have an ocean bloodhound on his track!"

But not a member of the council stirred, not a word answered the audacious Spaniard.

"Then he shall be hunted for private vengeance!" he went on after several minutes of silence. "I go without the sanction of the council too timid to speak when it has been insulted. When I am on the seas I will forget that Cartagena has wrongs to avenge. I will think only of my own insults, and the wrongs of the girl who transformed the Red Mogul into the Ocean Huntress. Keep your chairs, men of Cartagena; and plan against the Sea Spider; but never ask Captain Cutlass again for the service of his sword!"

He started toward the door with his drawn cutlass flashing back the light that streamed from the brilliant chandelier that hung above the heads of the council.

"We will buy you a ship," ventured Major Barro, the advocate, as he left his chair, with approving nods from his colleagues.

"Buy one when a sea swallow rots in the harbor?" was the disdainful rejoinder. "I will put to sea in the craft that suits me best, no thanks to the timid hares of Cartagena!"

"We forbid you to leave the town without our consent," said the advocate, madly.

"Very well," laughed the Spaniard, as he stopped at the door and with arms folded on his broad chest looked down on the council. "I have faced fiercer lions than those in Cartagena before to-night. Arrest me? Very well,

hares of the city. Touch Captain Fortuno and you touch the King of Spain!"

The listeners recoiled in their seats, while the last sentence of the Spanish captain ended with a fearless laugh.

"Hol bol touch me, touch Spain!" continued Captain Fortuno, and with the insulting and triumphant laugh ringing in their ears, the men of the council saw the Spaniard walk out of their presence.

There was a look of quick determination in the captain's eyes while he walked from the palace with the astonished Council of Safety behind him.

"There'll be music in the air at daylight," he laughed to himself. "Look out, Captain Cutlass. The bloodhounds are sharpening their teeth for your flesh."

Just before dawn the sleepy sentries on the walls of the harbor forts thought they saw the Peruvian vessel move slowly from her old anchorage.

They looked the second time, and, concluding that they were mistaken, relapsed into the condition of unwatchfulness.

At last they were roused by a wild cheer that came up from the water that slept placidly in the soft light of the morning stars.

What did it mean?

Only that the Pearl of Peru, the handsome ship intended for show, not for fight, had actually crept away from their protecting guns, and was moving off with a stiff wind among the white sails!

"This for the hares of Cartagena!" cried the man who stood on the quarter-deck of the Pearl and snapped his fingers at the vanishing lights of the city. "I am once more afloat. Captain Fortuno and his ocean serpents are on the buccaneer's track! Ah! Manton, my boy, isn't this glorious, and wasn't it splendidly done?"

Before Manton could reply a footstep fell upon his ears, and he turned to behold Lona Seward, beautiful and blushing, yet with triumph written on her features.

"What! you here?" he exclaimed, astounded.

"Why not? Isn't this a hunt for vengeance? Have I forgotten the victim of the raft—my father? Never! I am going to be in at the death."

"But how came you here?"

"I overheard your plans for the capture in the Water Garden and I beat you on board; that is all."

CHAPTER XIV.

A DAGGER AT WORK.

CAPTAIN FORTUNO'S mission to the council had failed; but the coup which followed had proved successful.

The Pearl of Peru, well equipped for an ocean chase instead of rotting under the guns of the forts, had got to sea again, and the man who commanded on her decks was Captain Cutlass's greatest enemy.

The Huntress had the advantage of several hours' start before a stiff breeze that sent her like a swallow across the sea, but nevertheless the Spanish captain was in her wake.

Fairweather Tom was in his element again.

"I reckon the next time we catch the ocean outlaw, he'll not get away before I get my reward, eh, lieutenant?" he said to Manton, several days after the inauguration of the chase.

"I hope not, Tom," was the answer. "Captain Fortuno promises to attend to that."

"What does he intend to do?" asked the stalwart Yankee sailor, quickly. "Look here, Mr. Manton," he went on before the lieutenant could reply. "By my tophights! I have sworn that Captain Cutlass goes back to Cartagena when we've caught him. I want the reward that slipped through my fingers the other night, and I'm goin' to have it. No stretching at the yard-arm for Captain Cutlass while I serve on this ship."

"You forget the girl—Miss Lona, Tom," ventured Manton.

"Bless her sweet face, I don't forget her for a moment," was the prompt response. "There's two women in this game—the one on this ship and the Jaguar Queen. One's an angel, the other's a devil. I know how Captain Cutlass has wronged Miss Lona—how he sent her father, the major, adrift on the raft to die of thirst in the midst of water. She wants revenge, while the other woman would die for the captain. But, lieutenant, Captain Cutlass goes back alive to Cartagena when we've caught him. The council will make Lona's wrongs even."

Manton made no reply, but turned his glass toward the west where the sun was sinking into the sea as it were.

The shadow of the Peruvian vessel was length-

ening on the waves, and the young lieutenant knew that soon it would disappear altogether.

Three days out from Cartagena before a brisk breeze, and no sight of Captain Cutlass yet.

Captain Fortuno was ready for his rival; the Pearl had been put in fighting trim and her crew were eager to cross cutlasses once more with the Sea Spiders who were sailing in the vessel they had called their "ocean home."

"There won't be a star to-night," suddenly remarked Manton looking up at the heavens as the last vestige of the sun dipped behind the watery rim.

"Then we must keep our peepers open, eh?" smiled Tom.

"That we must. Once Captain Cutlass pounced upon us when we thought him a thousand leagues away, and it cost us some of our best men, too."

"He can't do that in the Huntress," the sailor answered.

Manton smiled.

"I am almost willing to believe that he can do anything," he said.

"When we watch?"

"Even when we watch."

"There's nothing on the sea now."

"Not a moving speck save the ship that carries us." And with another scrutinizing look over the vast expanse of darkening water the lieutenant turned away and left Fairweather Tom on watch.

The night came quick and soon left the Pearl bowling along through a black sea.

As Manton had said there were no stars in the sky, and the best glass was useless for an inspection of their surroundings.

All at once Fairweather Tom started as if he had heard a suspicious sound.

It came from the starboard quarter of the Pearl, and was of a nature which cannot be intelligibly described.

All alert, the Yankee seaman listened.

"It was something," he said to himself. "I never miss a sound when in dangerous water. I heard something as sure as fate."

For twenty minutes the ship kept on with Fairweather Tom listening with all his might amid the gloom of his surroundings.

"Mebbe after all—"

The sailor broke his own observation abruptly and bounded to the vessel's side.

"Fool this son of the sea if you can!" fell triumphantly from his lips. "Come back into my clutches, Captain Cutlass, and get me the prize money you cheated me out of before."

The next moment a step behind him made the Yankee sailor turn, and he saw a slender figure, and caught the gleam of an uplifted knife.

"Die, killer of the Serpent's pets!" hissed a voice in his ear, and before the tar could throw up a hand to arrest the stroke, down came the dagger, and he dropped to the deck without even a warning groan.

All this took place in the space of a second, or in the flash of an eyelash, as it were.

"Now come, captain, when you will," said the victor, throwing a glance over the Pearl's side. "You will find some one on this prize to welcome you. What! are you out there now? Didn't I just hear the noise of an oar?"

Still clutching the knife, the speaker leaned over the Pearl's side and looked down.

If the sound of oars had been heard it was not repeated, and after listening again, the slayer turned to Fairweather Tom.

"Lie where you are and create some excitement on board this ship," she said. "I'll go back to the secret hiding-place which the Peruvian builders of this ocean swallow must have made for me."

Two minutes later the deck was deserted by all save the motionless tar, and the Pearl, which scarcely moved now for want of wind, remained like a huge bird sleeping on the surface of the sea.

It was twenty minutes later when Roland Manton pushed open the door of Captain Fortuno's cabin and entered.

He found the Spaniard seated at his stationary table with charts and some important papers before him, the whole scene revealed by the lamp that swung over his head.

But why did Manton suddenly spring forward and halt before Captain Fortuno as if he had made the most horrible discovery of his life?

The next moment he was staring into the Spaniard's face, and marking the blood-stains that were seen on the silver embroidery of his velvet jacket!

"My God! who has been here?" cried Manton in thrilling voice. "What vile assassin have we carried to sea?" and he caught the captain's wrist and felt the flickerings of a feeble pulse.

For several minutes the young lieutenant stood spellbound in the cabin, holding the wrist of Captain Fortuno, and staring into his pallid and expressionless face.

"I will find out who did this!" he suddenly exclaimed. "The villain must be somewhere in the ship."

He rushed from the captain's cabin and appeared suddenly on deck.

"Tom?"

There was no answer.

"Heavens! the knife has reached my best friend!" ejaculated Manton, as he stooped over the object his foot had suddenly struck.

A minute later the alarm was given, and the crew of the Pearl poured up from below.

In a few words Manton acquainted them with what had happened, and their indignation was terrible.

"There's a mystery here which must be probed to the bottom," said the lieutenant, addressing the assembled crew. "Somewhere aboard this vessel the assassin lurks. Let every inch of space be searched, and when the demon is found, I promise you that the yard shall bear the hangman's fruit."

If Manton could have penetrated the darkness that surrounded the Pearl at that moment, he would have seen four boats pulling away with muffled oars.

One of these boats, well filled with men, shot out from under the very bows of the Pearl, and by good pulling joined the three which had been in the advance.

And if he could have watched them as they swept over the surface of the sea with no more noise than the gull makes when on the wing, he would have seen them pull up alongside a well-built vessel that lay motionless like his own on the water.

Like monkeys the occupants of the boats climbed up to the somewhat elevated deck, and the handsome, flashing-eyed man, who awaited them in dazzling uniform, exclaimed in tones of impatience:

"Well, what of the vessel over there, Spiders?"

"It is the Pearl of Peru, Captain Fortuno."

"Holy Dios! Then, by the gods of vengeance, we'll show him the hands of Captain Cutlass before another hour! Captain Fortuno, eh? The council gave him the Pearl in which to hunt us down! Very well, captain; but the hunted has turned hunter. The tiger bites the fool who treads on his tail."

"But hear me through, captain. A knife has been at work on the enemy's vessel."

"Whose dagger?" cried Captain Cutlass.

"That we do not know. Captain Fortuno has been struck—"

"And killed?"

"Not quite."

"Then forward, before death throttles him! Are they not searching the Pearl for the wielder of the knife?"

"Yes."

"Then we will not be looked for. Ah! fools of the sea, when least expected Captain Cutlass comes. I pray that fortune will hold death at bay till I find you, Captain Fortuno. What a debt I have to settle with you! And the person who has struck at your heart, captain? By the sea gods! I will send him to doom on the raft that has made the name of Captain Cutlass terrible!"

As the captain of the Huntress, the merciless scourge of tropical waters, disappeared below, he was followed by his second officer, Lieutenant Dramon, who touched him on the shoulder at the foot of the ladder.

"Well, sir?" demanded Captain Cutlass, whirling fiercely upon the officer.

"The prisoner wishes to see you. I promised to carry his request to you, and I do so now."

For one brief moment the brow of the buccaneer darkened, then cleared quickly, and Dramon saw his eyes snap.

"I'll see him," he said, and the following minute he halted at a door which he struck with his clinched hand.

"Come in," said a voice on the inside and Captain Cutlass opened the door and entered.

He had scarcely crossed the threshold when a man rose from a chair a few feet ahead, and an elegant cutlass fell ringing at the pirate's feet.

"We are on an equality at last!" hissed the captain's confronter, stepping forward with a similar weapon in his right hand. "If I am your prisoner, Captain Cutlass, I am not altogether harmless."

The Sea Spider seemed to have lost all power of volition, and stood like a person nailed to the floor.

"Ha! ha! does my fortune amaze you?"

laughed the other. "Come, captain; pick up your cutlass and give Colonel Cristo a chance to fight a man equally armed."

Then it was that the captain of the burned Vampire stooped and snatched the cutlass from the floor, and threw a mad look over it at the cool man burning to meet him.

"In the first place, Colonel Cristo, name to me the man who armed you," he said.

"I'm no traitor, Captain Cutlass," was the answer. "Better for you, perhaps, if you had left me in Cartagena; don't you think so? But you thought I would make love to the American girl if I remained, and so you had to take me against my will to the vessel you surprised under the guns of the forts. Who armed me for this encounter? Oh, no, *mon ami*; it wouldn't do for Colonel Cristo to mention him here. Defend yourself!"

The Frenchman rushed forward as he spoke the last word, but just then the door was flung open, and a pistol-shot filled the place.

Colonel Cristo dropped his cutlass and staggered back with a mad curse, his sword-arm shattered at the wrist!

CHAPTER XV.

THE FRENCHMAN'S VENGEANCE.

THE man who had fired the lucky shot and who leaped into the state-room was Lieutenant Dramon.

Captain Cutlass turned to him without a single look of thanks, but with a gleam of rage in his eyes.

"Pick up that cutlass," he said pointing to the weapon which had fallen from Colonel Cristo's hand.

Lieutenant Dramon stared at the Sea Spider and hesitated.

"Take up the Frenchman's weapon—the one you gave him sharpened for my skull!" continued the buccaneer.

The lieutenant cast his still smoking pistol aside and stepped toward the cutlass.

"Pick it up and let him cut you to the shoulders," grated the wounded Frenchman, looking at Dramon. "For that pistol-shot I could blow your brains out. Ah! it shall yet be Cristo's day."

Biting his lips under his mustache, the lieutenant picked up the weapon and turned on the sea rover who sprung forward with cutlass raised.

"Now go at it," grinned Colonel Cristo. "It isn't my fight, but I'm interested in it just the same."

For one brief moment the two officers glared at one another like tiger-duelists, and then the cutlass went to work.

Colonel Cristo held his breath while he watched the mad duel.

"May the captain win!" he inwardly ejaculated. "I have a settlement to make with him. As for Dramon I bought the swords he fetched me."

There were a number of excited passes and a feint here and there, when all at once, with the fury of a tiger that cannot be met, the Captain of the Huntress leaped at Dramon, and the uplifted cutlass came down with a fury that for a second stilled the Frenchman's heart.

It was a terrible blow.

It beat down the arm and the blade that tried to stop it, and the traitor-lieutenant fell at Cristo's feet, cut by the fury of that stroke clear to the shoulders.

"A traitor never stands long before Captain Cutlass!" laughed the victor, glancing at the wounded and horrified spectator of the brief combat. "When your wrist heals, my dear colonel, we'll try conclusions with the blades. I'll send my surgeon to your assistance. Keep cool, and bide your time."

"I'll do that—never fear!" shot the Frenchman at the pirate, as he turned away. "When I fail to come to time at your call, let the name of Cristo be applied to cowards only."

With a final glance at the man he had cut through, Captain Cutlass vanished, and appeared suddenly to the crew gathered on deck.

"Now, sirs, we will attend to the enemy," he said, in a manner which did not indicate that anything unusual had happened below, but the next instant he touched the little surgeon on the arm and said, significantly:

"The prisoner needs your services, doctor. Cure him up for me!"

If the buccaneer crew missed Dramon they did not ask Captain Cutlass what had become of him; they knew better than to question impertinently the man they had obeyed for years.

Once more four boats were lowered with but little noise over the vessel's side.

"There's no wind for us to-night," said Captain Cutlass to the men, as he stepped into one of the boats, all of which were provided with muffled oars. "We can't charge down upon the Spanish spawn before a brisk breeze and strike him when he least looks for us, but we can board him just the same. The battle-cry of the Sea Spiders shall sound on his deck just the same."

The boats pushed off with but two living souls on board the Huntress, the ship's doctor and his patient.

The buccaneers were armed to the teeth, and under their mad leader were ready to board the best-manned ship that ever cut the sea.

"We're the guards left behind," said the doctor to Colonel Cristo who sat in a chair with his arm bandaged and well dressed by the little man who had performed the same office for many others in his time.

The Frenchman started and looked into the doctor's face.

"Where are Captain Cutlass and his sea crabs?" he asked.

"On the track of the best hater they have—Captain Fortuno."

"Is the Spaniard so near?"

"Scarcely a mile away."

The answer seemed to convey incredible information to the winged Frenchman.

"How long have they been gone?" he asked.

The doctor consulted his watch a moment and said:

"Thirty minutes."

A sudden light impossible to describe flashed up in Colonel Cristo's eyes like the outburst of a volcano.

"It is my time already!" he said to himself. "By the demons of vengeance! I will make them all sea orphans."

He lifted his left hand and for a moment seemed to measure with his eye the space between him and the doctor.

Then, all of a sudden, his hand shot out as his body darted forward and his fingers landed in the twinkling of an eye against the target aimed at—the little surgeon's throat!

The attack was too sudden and fierce to be resisted, and, unable to shake off the mad clutch, the doctor went backward to the floor!

Of course he found the hand of Colonel Cristo still glued to his throat.

Poor Doctor Santin gasped for breath and tried to tear loose the grip of the wounded villain, but in almost less time than we have taken to narrate this incident, he was choked into insensibility, and Colonel Cristo arose panting and victorious.

"What can't a man with one hand do when he sets his head?" he said aloud. "My dear doctor, we are the sole guards of the Huntress you say—the only Spiders left in the floating web! By heavens! the man of the mad cutlass shall know that a shattered wrist is nothing to Colonel Cristo, late of Napoleon's Legion."

He took the lamp from its fastenings and left the state-room with the unconscious doctor for its sole occupant.

There was a blaze of demon fury in his eyes.

Had the wound and his failure to revenge himself on Captain Cutlass driven him mad?

Spurred on by a desire for vengeance which had taken full possession of his whole being, Colonel Cristo seemed to forget his wounded wrist.

He did not stop until he reached the upper deck.

With one hand he loosened the smallest boat found on the davits and dropped it over the vessel's side, where he saw it right itself in the water.

"Now for the vengeance of the Cristo blood! Now for the destruction of the Spiders' web!"

He went back to the lamp and made it light his way to the ship's hold.

Deep down amid its darkness he opened a door and revealed a lot of old cordage heaped almost to the ceiling.

"What is better than this?" he laughed.

"Oh, when you get ahead of a Cristo, Captain Cutlass, the moon sweats blood!"

It was the ejaculation of a desperate man.

All at once he raised the lamp above his head and with a cry of rage flung it upon the pile.

The effect was immediate; the material caught as if it had been powder, and with a piece of burning rope in his hand, Colonel Cristo lit his way back to the deck.

Assisted by the rope which kept his boat from leaving the ship, the Frenchman lowered himself over the side, dropped into the little craft, cut the rope with his knife and, despite his wound, pulled away.

"Good-by mon ami le Capitaine," he ex-

claimed. "When you beat Colonel Cristo at his own game, the moon sweats blood!"

The laugh that followed was that of a man who had carried his life in his own hands for thirty years.

Every minute he glanced back at the ship he had just left.

Suddenly a flame leaped above the deck.

"At last!" he cried. "When Doctor Santin wakens he will think of me!"

Higher and higher leaped the flames, and while Cristo watched them he heard the dip of oars behind him.

"Ah! the Spiders are coming back to the burning web," he ejaculated.

Dropping his oars he seized a pistol and waited.

"It is no use," said a loud voice which he recognized as belonging to Captain Cutlass. "The vessel is doomed to destruction. Spiders of the Sea, we must put about and fight like devils for the other ship!"

CHAPTER XVI.

HARSH COMMANDS.

It was the only alternative left the scourges of the Gulf.

Colonel Cristo could see Captain Cutlass standing erect in the bow of the boat, with the light of the burning vessel shining full on face and figure.

"Back and fight for another web!" he said, in tones of command to his men. "In yon burning ship are two doomed men—Doctor Santin and the French villain. We can do nothing for them."

The four boats drew back from the lurid light thrown round upon the water, and waited for it to subside.

Cristo turned his attention to the Huntress.

For more than an hour the flames roared and cracked as they licked up the sea swallow, but it suddenly ended in the explosion of the magazine, which sent a shower of sparks skyward, and then settled back into darkness again.

"If I could reach the other vessel first, I'd insure you a warm reception, Captain Cutlass," hissed the Frenchman, and he involuntarily took up the oars.

A minute later, however, he relinquished them with a curse of bitter disappointment, for his wounded wrist had swelled terribly, and the pain was excruciating.

"Go and find them prepared, anyhow!" he grated, glancing toward the four boats. "I know you'll find Captain Fortuno ready for you."

Helpless now in mid-sea, among pieces of the burned ship, Colonel Cristo was obliged to settle back in his boat and calmly await events.

He knew that Captain Cutlass and his Sea Spiders were creeping through the waters with muffled oars toward the Pearl of Peru, within whose sides, as we have already said, startling scenes had just occurred.

Every part of the vessel was being searched for the wielder of the dagger which had almost put an end to two lives.

The sailors were burning with revenge, and woe to the would-be assassin if their hunt should unearth him.

In the midst of the search Manton saw a flame leap above the sea over their starboard quarter.

Higher and higher it sprang in its efforts to touch the sky, and then the tall masts of a vessel became visible.

The American lieutenant could not repress a start.

A ship so near! It seemed incredible, and yet it was true.

"It is Captain Cutlass's work!" said the lieutenant, to the young girl who stood beside him on the deck, watching the grand spectacle afforded by the burning ship. "We are just beyond the rim of the light. The fire does not reveal us. Ah! the captain does not dream that we are so near."

Lona's eyes glistened with eagerness while she listened to Manton.

"I wish we could strike the blow fortune is delaying," she said.

"It will fall soon," was the answer.

"What makes you think so?"

"Are we not in the same waters with Captain Cutlass? Do we not look upon a piece of his work?"

"Yes, but he may be gliding away at this moment."

"Or toward us," added Manton.

"I hope we are to meet!" cried the girl.

"Yes, I invite Captain Cutlass to attack this ship. True, Captain Fortuno is at the threshold of death, but the sailors will not want for a

brave leader." And the fair girl gave Manton a look that made him blush to the temples.

"I would give my sword to discover who struck Tom and the captain those dastardly blows," he said. "We have searched every part of this ship but without result. If it contains any secret compartments, they have not been found."

"Have you any suspicion?"

"I cannot say that I have. If it had taken place in Cartagena I might justly suspect a certain person."

"The woman who lured you to the dungeon?"

"Yes, the Jaguar Queen as Tom calls her. He says that she struck him to-night, but it cannot be. We didn't carry such a creature to sea with us."

Manton's sentence was ended abruptly by the terrific explosion which put an end to the burning vessel, and he saw Lona turn away with a deep-drawn sigh.

"I wish Captain Cutlass would try his hand on us," he said, half under his breath. "I long to cross swords with this Sea Spider. He will never go back to Cartagena for trial if we meet him on the water."

"Thanks," said a voice so near that Manton started. "I never forget for a moment the man he sent adrift on the raft—my father. By that act he made vengeance the daughter's property."

The lieutenant would have replied, but the next moment the girl had disappeared and he was alone again.

"The captain asks for you," said one of the crew appearing that instant at his side.

"Conscious at last? Thank fortune!" ejaculated Manton as he started below.

When he entered Captain Fortuno's state-room on tip-toe, he saw the Spaniard propped up in a chair and waiting for him with eagerness.

"This is what I got for being at her feet once," he said as Manton came up. "My boy, you will find the Serpent of Cartagena. She is somewhere on board."

"We have searched the vessel thoroughly, captain; we—"

"The match will find her!" interrupted the captain, madly. "Fire will bring the rats from their holes."

Manton glanced at the ship's doctor, who stood at the captain's side.

"Captain Fortuno's mind does not wander," the doctor said.

"No," smiled the Spaniard, as he touched the lieutenant's arm. "Get the boats ready. We will find the Serpent who boasts that her sting is death."

Manton, brave and obedient to a fault, did not hesitate.

"It shall be done," he said.

He had scarcely finished when several loud shouts came down from the deck, and then the loud reports of pistols followed.

Captain Fortuno uttered a strange cry.

"Heavens!" cried Manton, leaping toward the door. "The Sea Spiders are again upon us!"

"Then let this end it forever!" grated the wounded captain.

CHAPTER XVII.

VICTORY AND PEACE.

"DOWN with the Spanish spawn!" soared skyward as the Spiders of the Sea, headed by Captain Cutlass, swarmed over the Pearl's sides and rushed to the hand-to-hand combat.

The unsuspecting crew rallied in a moment, and the shock was bloody from the first, as cutlass met cutlass in the weird light of the ship's lanterns, and the men who bated one another so cordially contended for the slippery deck.

"Death to the Water Spiders!" responded Captain Fortuno's followers, nothing daunted by the old cry which had rung in their ears on several previous occasions.

Manton reached the scene of the desperate encounter in time to see his men yielding to the impetuous onslaught of the pirates who were now without a vessel.

Without a moment's hesitation he put himself at their head, and led them in person against the common enemy.

To the single occupant of the boat some distance away the noise of the sanguinary fight was delightful music.

It allayed the pain that racked his nerves, and made his eyes glitter with delight when he imagined Captain Cutlass cut down at the head of his desperate followers.

The crews were pretty equally matched in point of numbers, and each one fought with that determination which commands success.

Inch by inch the red decks of the Pearl were fought over with the ferocity that would distinguish a battle between two ranks of jungle tigers.

Captain Fortuno guarded by his doctor who stood near the door with a pistol in each hand, was obliged to withhold himself from the fight, but his eyes flashed with the old light of battle, and he clinched his hands while he listened to the uproar that came down from above.

"If Manton is there I am satisfied," the Spaniard said. "I know that young American lion. When he leads, victory fights at his side."

It was even so.

If Captain Fortuno could have reached the upper deck when he uttered these words he would have witnessed the final charge led by Manton.

"No quarter! Down with the Spanish dogs!" cried the buccaneers as they met the charge with the courage of old lions.

"No quarter be it, then!" responded Manton's men. "There shall be no trails for piracy at Cartagena after this battle. Death to the red Sea Spiders!"

That wild shock, most impetuous of all, was the last.

For the first time since the opening attack, Manton found himself face to face with Captain Cutlass. The recognition was instantaneous and mutual, and at the same moment the two enemies darted at each other.

The two cutlasses descending with great force met in mid-air, and the combatants, separated by the shock, recoiled several paces.

"Come, boy, let us finish it!" cried Captain Cutlass. "By the water-gods! I must have a ship to-night, and this one suits me well."

"Get it if you can, captain!" shouted Manton, coming forward for a renewal of the encounter.

The next moment there rung out a voice which startled the two officers.

"Call off your dogs of battle, Manton!" it said. "The man you face belongs to me."

Captain Cutlass saw the speaker before the young American.

"Roza!" he ejaculated. "I thought my choking finished you in Cartagena."

"No, Captain Cutlass," was the reply. "That is what I got for freeing you from the dungeon under the palace—a hand at my throat. I have seen the time when I would have died for you; now I am going to scatter your brains over the last ship you have boarded!"

Manton saw a pistol go up and cover the breast of the buccaneer.

The sight sent a thrill to his heart.

"No! That man is my foe!" he exclaimed starting toward the woman.

Ere he reached her he saw the flash of a pistol beyond where she stood and Captain Cutlass reeled away!

"The victim of the raft has been avenged!" said a voice at the sound of which the baffled Serpent turned.

"He belonged to me—to the Serpent of Cartagena!" she hissed and the next moment she would have thrown herself upon the firer of the shot had not Manton clutched her wrist.

Proudly erect, with victory in her lustrous eyes and a smoking pistol in her hand, stood Lona Seward.

"When that Sea Spider spins another web the world will know it!" she said, looking at the man in the embroidered velvet jacket, who lay on the bloody deck. "I have cheated the Council of Safety out of a captive; but I have also avenged my dead!"

The sea fight was over when the beautiful avenger turned away.

The Spiders of the Wave had failed to secure another floating web, and the look that appeared in Captain Fortuno's eyes when he was informed of the termination of the conflict, told that their career was ended.

A few days afterward the people of Cartagena were astonished to learn that the Pearl of Peru had come back to her old moorings under the guns of the forts.

At first there were loud threats against the audacious man who had taken the ship away; but when they saw him carried in a litter through the streets to face the Council of Safety and to tell it that Captain Cutlass would trouble the honest sea traders no more, and that the survivors of the last conflict had been swung off at the yard, they forgot all resentment and cheered him to the palace steps.

The good news made the council magnanimous, and the Spaniard and his crew became the lions of the hour.

The Jaguar Queen who had dealt the two al-

most fatal blows on board the pirate-hunter, accompanied the visitors back to Cartagena, where she soon made her escape from custody and disappeared.

It was said that, fierce as he was, Captain Fortuno could not find heart to punish the woman he had loved, but who had deserted him for his old enemy, Captain Cutlass.

Several days after the doom of the buccaneers, an English merchantman found a delirious man in an open boat drifting aimlessly on the water at the caprice of wind and wave.

When he recovered sufficiently to talk, he made himself known as Colonel Cristo, late of the French service, and told how he had destroyed the Sea Spider's nest.

He was taken to Cartagena where he did not attempt to get into Lona's good graces, as certain events told him that a certain handsome young American sailor was ahead of him, and he left quietly after his wound healed, and died under Napoleon's eagles at Waterloo.

As for Manton, he made the beautiful avenger his wife, and returned to his native country, accompanied by Fairweather Tom, who bore on his body to his dying day the scar of the dagger wound inflicted by the Serpent of the Tropics!

Captain Fortuno got a new ship for his services to the merchant service, and whenever he entered the harbor of Cartagena, the forts ran up their gayest colors, and the brass guns belched forth a salute.

For it was all over!

The flag of the Scourge of the Gulf floated no more where it once meant terror and death, and no more echoed over the waves this battle-cry:

"Down with the Spanish spawn!"

THE END.

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